TESTED: THE MICE THE PROFESSIONALS USE

AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

PC PowerPlay

SINCE 1996

2024 GAME of the YEAR AWARDS

BOMBASTIC

BLACK OPS 6

HEADSHOT OR MISFIRE?

THRILLING

PLANET COASTER 2

CREATE ELITE THEME PARKS

FUTURE

AUS $13.99 * NZ $15.90
PPA 100003375 * ISSN 1326-5644

9 771326 564019 73

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

CLAIR OBSCUR

EXPEDITION 33

DISCOVER THE NEW DARK FANTASY ADVENTURE THAT'S ABOUT TO CHANGE RPGs FOREVER

VEILGUARD | MECHWARRIOR | WIZORDUM | & MORE

AORUS

TEAM UP.
FIGHT ON.

AI Gaming Laptops | RTX 40 SUPER GPUs | OLED Monitors

Explore AORUS Gaming Gears here.

GIGABYTE™

TESTED: THE MICE THE PROFESSIONALS USE
PC PowerPlay
GAME of the YEAR AWARDS
WORLD EXCLUSIV
CLAIR OBSC
EXPEDITIO
DISCOVER THE NEW DARK FANTAS
THAT'S ABOUT TO CHANGE RPG
VEILGUARD | MECHWARRIOR | WIZ
TESTED: THE MICE THE PROFESSIONALS USE
PC PowerPlay
GAME of the YEAR
CLAIR OBSCUR
EXPEDITION 33
DISCOVER THE NEW DARK FANTASY ADVENTURE THAT'S ABOUT TO CHANGE RPGS FOREVER
VEILGUARD | MECHWARRIOR | WIZORDUM | & MOR
TESTED: THE MICE THE PROFESSIONALS USE
PC PowerPlay
GAME of the YEAR
CLAIR OBSCUR
EXPEDITION 33

SUBSCRIPTION ENQUIRIES

(02) 8227 6486
www.techmags.com.au
future@crmaus.com.au

PC PowerPlay
AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG
SINCE 1996

Future Publishing Australia,
PO Box Q1179, Queen Victoria Building,
NSW 1230
Corporate Web: www.futureplc.com

Editorial
Editor **Ben Mansill**
ben.mansill@futurenet.com
Group Art Director **Troy Coleman**
troy.coleman@futurenet.com

Photography
All copyrights and trademarks are recognised and respected

Advertising
auadvertising@futurenet.com

Management
Managing Director: **Neville Daniels**
Commercial Director: **Chris Ferguson**
chris.ferguson@futurenet.com

Printed in Australia by IVE
Distributed in Australia and NZ by Are Direct

ISSN 0728-441

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards. The manufacturing paper mill holds full FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) or PEFC certification and accreditation

All contents © 2024 Future Publishing Australia or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you automatically grant Future and its licensees a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Any material you submit is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend, adapt all submissions.

Privacy statement
If you provide information about yourself this will be used to provide you with products or services you have requested. We may supply your information to contractors to enable us to do this. Future Publishing Australia will also use your information to inform you of other publications, products, services and events. Future Publishing Australia may also give your information to organisations that are providing special prizes or offers and are clearly associated with the Reader Offer. Unless you tell us not to, Future Publishing Australia may give your information to other organisations that may use it to inform you of other products, services or events. If you would like to gain access to the information Future Publishing Australia holds about you, please contact us.

FUTURE
Connectors. Creators. Experience Makers.

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)
www.futureplc.com

Chief executive **Jon Steinberg**
Non-executive chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief financial officer **Sharjeel Suleman**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

THIS IS AN RPG THAT FEELS EXCITINGLY FRESH AND UNIQUE

BEN MANSILL

This month
Spent an afternoon painting with The Paintress, which he told her was very palette-able. After making one too many painting puns, though, The Paintress erased him from existence. Fair.

SUBSCRIBE TO PC PowerPlay
Check out our latest offer!
SEE p32

Thanks to spending many a night in my youth enjoying classic turn-based combat RPGs, such as those in the *Final Fantasy*, *Suikoden*, and *Persona* series, I now have a soft spot in my heart for these synonymously Japanese fantasy adventures.

Clearly, so too does Sandfall Interactive, an exciting new French studio that next year is set to bring gamers *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*, a stunning new dark fantasy RPG adventure that not only builds on the established JRPG core in novel ways, but feels excitingly fresh and unique. We've got the scoop on page 34!

BEN MANSILL
EDITOR
ben.mansill@futurenet.com

The PC PowerPlay team

JAKE TUCKER

This month
Pondered the query that has stumped humans for centuries: are octopuses scarier than robots?

IAN EVENDEN

This month
While founding his own Type II civ in *Beyond Astra* he solved the three-body problem. What you do is...

ELIE GOULD

This month
Marched around PCG Towers demanding to know if we were The Thing. Understandable.

MOLLIE TAYLOR

This month
Realised she didn't need to sleep, ever, so farmed beetroot at 1am. Oh, and in *Mirthwood* she...

Contents

#307

SUBSCRIBE TO
PC PowerPlay
Check out our latest offer!
SEE p32

TESTED: THE MICE THE PROFESSIONALS USE
PC PowerPlay
AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG
SINCE 1996
2024
GAME of the YEAR AWARDS
BLACK OPS 6
HEADSHOT OR MISFIRE?
PLANET COASTER 2
CREATE ELITE THEME PARKS
WORLD EXCLUSIVE
CLAIR OBSCUR
EXPEDITION 33
DISCOVER THE NEW DARK FANTASY ADVENTURE THAT'S ABOUT TO CHANGE RPGs FOREVER
VEILGUARD | MECHWARRIOR | WIZORDUM | & MORE

Monitor

06 THE TOP STORY
The *Assassin's Creed* boss pushes back on internet outrage mills

08 SPECIAL REPORT
How *Pathfinder: The Dragon's Demand* is trying to do *Baldur's Gate III*, but in miniature.

12 MADE IN JAPAN
The latest PC gaming industry news from the Land of the Rising Sun

16 INCOMING
The hottest games to get excited for

Previews

18 Arc Raiders
22 The Thing Remastered
24 Mirthwood
26 Wizordum
28 EVE: Frontier
30 Beyond Astra

Features

34 Clair Obscur: Expedition 33
45 Game of the Year Awards

34

18 ARC RAIDERS

Jake Tucker straps on a Kojima-approved giant backpack, grabs a big gun, and goes off a-hunting for robots in a bright and hope-filled post-apocalyptic world.

34 EXPEDITION 33

Rob steps into the unknown to deliver this issue's cover story on Sandfall Interactive's excitingly fresh new turn-based combat RPG, *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*.

45 GAME OF THE YEAR AWARDS

After hours of debate, voting, and heightened emotions, the PCPP team delivers 2024's big winners.

62
THE VEILGUARD

Lauren Morton locks her doors, battens down the hatches, and stocks up on microwave ready meals so she can spend 70 hours reviewing the new *Dragon Age*.

84
TRIPLE TREAT?

Is one big screen now better than three small ones for sim racing? Ben Mansill compares three 27-inch monitors with one huge 49-incher in his rig.

86
COMPETITIVE GAMING MICE

Built with pro gamers in mind, even mere mortals have plenty to gain by using a pro mouse.

Reviews

58 Dragon Age: The Veilguard
64 MechWarrior 5: Clans
68 Judero
70 Starship Troopers: Extermination
74 Call of Duty: Black Ops 6
78 Planet Coaster 2

FREE GAMES

82 Funeralopolis: Last Days
83 Vile
83 Raide

Hardware

84 TECH TALES
86 GROUP TEST

Extra Life

108 NOW PLAYING

Webfishing, Turbo Overkill, Metal Gear Solid 3, The Forever Winter.

Both Yasuke and Naoe have caught flak.

UBI STRIKES BACK

Assassin's Creed boss pushes back on the internet outrage mills

If you've been following the general discussions around *Assassin's Creed Shadows*, you'll have probably noticed – if you've had the stomach for it – a great deal of fury about the game's lead characters.

The dual protagonists shown off for *Assassin's Creed Shadows* are a shinobi, Naoe, and a samurai, Yasuke. Yasuke's based on a 16th-century figure, an African who went on to be a retainer to Oda Nobunaga – this is also far, far from the first time he's shown up in media, both Japanese and otherwise. Which is why it's nice to see franchise head Marc-Alexis Coté finally push back against it with, for lack of a better phrase, his whole heart: "In *Assassin's Creed Shadows*, we highlight figures, both fictional like Naoe, a Japanese woman warrior, and historical, like Yasuke, the African-born samurai. While the inclusion of a Black samurai in feudal Japan has sparked questions and even controversy, Naoe, as a fictional character, has also faced scrutiny for her gender.

"OFFERING NEW POINTS OF VIEW THAT CHALLENGE ESTABLISHED NORMS"

"But just as Yasuke's presence in Japanese history is fact, so too are the stories of women who defied societal expectations and took up arms in times of conflict. So while both Naoe and Yasuke's stories are works of historical fiction, they reflect the collision of different worlds, cultures and roles, and their inclusion is precisely the kind of narrative that *Assassin's Creed* seeks to tell, one that reflects the complexity and interconnectedness of our shared history. By choosing

GOOGLE'S RUBLES

YOU WANT HOW MUCH!?

Struggling with bills? It could be a good bit worse. You could be Google, which has been hit by a fine in Russia so big it's actually more money than there is on the entire planet. Putin wants $2.5 decillion after YouTube banned some pro-Kremlin channels. He won't get it. ■ ***JW***

ADIÓS RATÓN

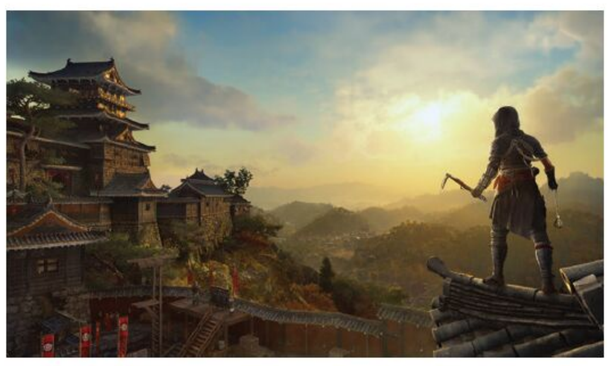
HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MOUSE?

Stardew Valley creator Eric Barone has warned players that its hat mouse has disappeared in Spanish games following the 1.6.9 update. However, even though the mouse sprite is gone, you can still interact with his shop menu. Let's just hope it's back in the next update. ■ ***KP***

TALK ABOUT LUCKY

REDDITOR'S RTX RELIEF

One fortunate Reddit user took a gamble on a super-cheap GPU listing on Amazon – and won. They posted to the site about their RTX 4070 purchase, found listed for a mere 50 Canadian dollars (or moose-moolah, as I believe it's called). To the surprise of all, the GPU actually arrived. ■ ***AE***



TOP: *Shadows* will be the first game in the AC Infinity platform.

Naoe and Yasuke as protagonists, we are expanding the narrative landscape, offering new points of view that challenge established norms in many works of fiction, while staying true to the history that shaped them."

MAKING HISTORY

It really is like night and day when compared to the company's previous stances – either there's some conflicting messaging, or Ubisoft's collectively blinked the fuzz out of its eyes and recognised that you might as well dig your heels in.

There's a little corporate speak going on here, don't get me wrong. *Assassin's Creed* gets described as "more than a game" and "a platform for meaningful exploration and reflection wrapped in the excitement of unforgettable gameplay" – which is executive babble, let's be honest. But the speech goes into some deeply impassioned territory that I'm surprised made it to the stage, "When we self-censor in the face of threats, we hand over our power, piece by piece, until freedom and creativity both wither away. We cannot let that happen. It's time for us as creators to stand firm on our commitment to our values, by telling stories that inspire, that challenge and that help people connect. Our silence cannot become complicit." ■ ***Harvey Randall***

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

Pricey titles
To appease a Steam user, *Webfishing* added a 'Straight' title – but it costs 9,999 fish bucks .

Another surprise
It only took eight years and an orchestral jazz cover but *Persona 5*'s Last Surprise finally won a Grammy.

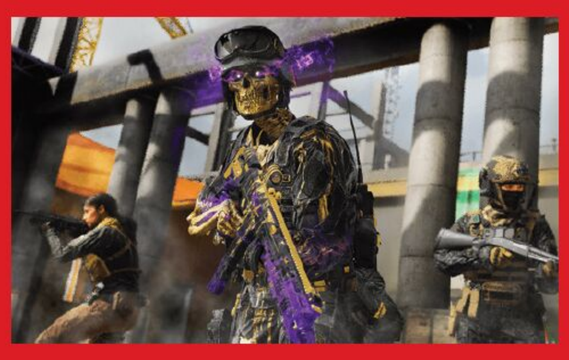
Finish the fight
A group of *Halo* modders has delivered a playable version of the legendary *Halo 2* Earth City demo.

Nuked
A hacker used a *Call of Duty* anti-cheat exploit to ban thousands of innocent players.

Off to oblivion
Bethesda is closing its *Elder Scrolls* card game.

Bad signs
Sony isn't giving up on PSN sign-ins for its PC games – the company president says it's necessary so people can 'safely' play them.

LOWS



Special Report

PCPP INVESTIGATES

The birdman community disavows the actions of these malefactors.

FINDING A PATH

The DRAGON'S DEMAND is trying to do Baldur's Gate III in miniature

Indie developer Ossian Studios is a bit of a people's champion for a certain brand of RPG sicko (and I'm a certain brand of RPG sicko). Company founder Alan Miranda worked at BioWare on *Baldur's Gate II* and *Neverwinter Nights* before striking out on his own. With the exception of an ambitious mobile RPG released in 2013, Ossian's work hasn't strayed far from *Neverwinter Nights*' umbrella, with its portfolio mostly consisting of ambitious, unique RPGs built on *NwN*'s foundation – expansions like *Darkness Over Daggerford* that punch well above their weight.

But now Ossian's going bigger than before with the crowdfunded *Pathfinder: The Dragon's Demand*, a standalone CRPG it's building from scratch, based on the new second edition rules for the Dungeons & Dragons-derived system. Miranda, who's directing, and lead designer (and longtime *Neverwinter Nights* modder) Luke Scull have the shared ambition to make a highly reactive *Baldur's Gate III*-style RPG work at a much smaller scale.

Like Owlcat's Pathfinder adaptations *Kingmaker* and *Wrath of the Righteous*, Ossian is adapting a pre-existing tabletop adventure. *The Dragon's Demand* is a module (read: self-contained story) that takes characters from level 1 to level 7. Even with Ossian adding an extra level to that cap (and reserving the right to push a little further in DLC), that's a far cry from the 20-level high-power fantasy of Owlcat's games or the 30-40 'epic level' caps in *Neverwinter Nights*. It's also a very intentional choice.

"*Baldur's Gate III* demonstrated that you can have a relatively low level spread, but still have a huge gain with lots of character choices, lots of build options," says Scull.

"Owlcat was making adventure paths, which are basically three of these kinds of modules put together," Miranda adds. "We chose that smaller size module... to make it manageable for us as an indie company to do."

There are a few reasons I find that scope particularly exciting. Ossian has no shortage of ambitious goals for *The Dragon's Demand*, and a corresponding sober realism in other areas of the project gives me confidence the studio will be able to get it all done.

Also, low-level RPGs rule. In addition to *Baldur's Gate III*, I point you to genre classics such as Troika's *Temple of Elemental Evil* (with a level cap of 10) or BioWare's original *Baldur's Gate* (8-10 depending on your class) for examples of low-level D&D done right. Lower levels often mean higher stakes, with characters lacking the inflated health pools and superhuman abilities of endgame builds. There can be a numbing effect to an RPG endgame swollen with overpowered abilities and magical items, leaking inflated damage numbers all over the floor.

Strange Encounters

One of the most exciting things about *Dragon's Demand* is its promise of novel, three-dimensional encounters. I've killed the rats in the cellar enough times, wow me. Underwater battles, duels on rooftops, fights that take advantage of my or my enemies' ability to fly: these are things you see all the time in tabletop, but are harder to implement in a CRPG.

thermaltake

POWER THAT LASTS

Toughpower GF A3 Gold Power Supply

650W | 750W | 850W | 1050W | 1200W

80 PLUS GOLD

ATX 3.0 Compatible

PCIe Gen **5.0 Ready**

10 Year Warranty

CarePlus

Powering Peace of Mind

TT CarePlus, Thermaltake's trusted warranty service for your Power Supply.

- Stress-Free
- Local Support
- Swift-Replacement

FIND OUT MORE

www.thermaltake.com.au

FAR LEFT: Full 3D dice rolls add to the toybox appeal of *Dragon's Demand*.

LEFT: I really need this fishman fight to happen in the final game.

PREVIOUSLY PLAYED *A quick jaunt through Ossian's history of RPGs*

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2: MYSTERIES OF WESTGATE

The final expansion to *Neverwinter Nights 2* and Ossian's first commercial release, focused on the city's underbelly.

THE SHADOW SUN

A BioWare-style RPG for iOS and Android, with a setting inspired by ancient Babylon. Ossian's sole non-*NwN* project to date.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS: DARKNESS OVER DAGGERFORD

Developed as an add-on for *Neverwinter Nights*, revamped as a "premium module" for Beamdog's remaster.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS: TYRANTS OF THE MOONSEA

Updated re-release of one of Luke Scull's *NwN* modules. A high-level adventure set in the Forgotten Realms' inland sea.

But that's not Ossian's only deflationary target with *The Dragon's Demand*. "As I've gotten older – and you'll hear this from other RPG players as they get older – they don't have time for 100-hour RPGs," Miranda says. "It'd be much nicer if it was a 20- or 30-hour game. And we thought that's something good to focus on."

MINI ME

"It was always going to be a miniatures game," Miranda says of the unique presentation. *The Dragon's Demand* is leaning into a virtual tabletop look, a sort of midpoint between *Tabletop Simulator* and a more traditional CRPG art style. Every character and enemy is represented by a static (though customisable and reflecting changes in equipment) model with a round base. My favourite touch is the full-3D, physics-simulated dice for attack and damage rolls, a fun twist on the visualised rolls in *Baldur's Gate III* and *Disco Elysium*.

"You're always looking for something to help differentiate your game," says Miranda. "There's so many games out there that are new versions of the original *Baldur's Gate* or going all the way to *Baldur's Gate III* with full 3D. It's a crowded space."

Since Ossian doesn't have to maintain a high level of animation fidelity, the studio can instead focus on simulating tabletop features and player options that don't often make it into videogame adaptations, like flight, swimming, or a cover system, "A lot of that would be a huge effort, even for someone like Larian to do all the character animations and sync all that up," Miranda says.

MY FAVOURITE TOUCH IS THE FULL-3D, PHYSICS-SIMULATED DICE

Scull believes that this will "open a whole new breadth of options" for him in designing the game, and he cites infiltration options like crowbarring open windows or climbing down chimneys as the kind of avenues he wants to give players. Miranda references immersive sim *Deus Ex* and hopes players will have to think "a bit in 3D" to overcome *Dragon's Demand*'s challenges and encounters.

Replicating some of the magic of *Baldur's Gate III* (maybe the most imm-simmy CRPG) seems to be Scull's primary ambition with *The Dragon's Demand*. He finds that *BGIII* had "the best of two game styles," with its open and interactive world as well as "the deep character writing and storytelling and encounter design of the very best traditional isometric RPGs". On the character writing front, Scull assures me that *Dragon's Demand* won't be an *Icewind Dale* or *Fallout: Tactics* sort of RPG where you have a party of blank slates, but will instead go for that whole-hog BioWare-style experience with "companions, romances, character arcs, quests" and "surprising revelations" that weave into the main narrative.

Though it will require "an incredibly large amount of writing and scripting," he believes the team at Ossian will replicate that open-ended Larian magic at a smaller, indie scale. "*Baldur's Gate III* has raised the bar," Scull argues, "and I think players would expect more in terms of player options and world reactivity and world interactivity moving forward from the very best RPGs. "That's what we're trying to do, be a DM that enables any play style." ■

Ted Litchfield

MSI MPG 321URX 240HZ AND 271QRX 360HZ

ENDGAME QD-OLED MONITORS

GET THE ULTIMATE VISUAL EXPERIENCE.

Take your immersion to the next level with stunning OLED performance—enjoy up to 360Hz refresh rate, 4K resolution and 32" and 27" display sizes.

SHOP NOW

LEARN MORE AT MSI.COM

Made in Japan

PC GAMING FROM THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN

Dospara's Osaka store is located in Den Den Town.

JAPAN'S PC PARADISE

Welcome to DOSPARA, Japan's biggest and best PC gaming chain

Unfortunately, social media has meant that old-school retro-gaming console chains in Japan such as Super Potato and Mandarake have now become well-known in the west, largely to their detriment. However, the Japanese PC gaming scene and its shops have managed to avoid this, remaining pretty obscure, and that's what I want to talk about here.

DR MARCO ZANGIROLAMI
Marco Zangirolami is an expert on the Japanese gaming industry, having reported on its PC, console and arcade business since 1996. Not many people know this, but he's also a legendary Gundam pilot, having taught Amuro Ray everything he knows.

The Japanese PC business is not handled by small independent stores, as can be found in the west, but by large chains such as SofMap, Tsukumo, Pasokon Kobo, and Janpara. But between these chains there are differences in offering, some dealing only in new systems, while others lean into used systems, components or, yes, gaming PCs.

And one of the most notable in terms of having a PC gaming focus is Dospara, which started in Tokyo's Akihabara district in 1984 with a mission to import western PCs and components, and specifically high-end gaming hardware. If you wanted a Creative Sound Blaster AWE32 sound card in the 1990s, for example, you'd go to Dospara for your upgrade. Today there are multiple Dospara stores, such as the one in Osaka's Den Den Town, which is a massive five-storey store just off Nipponbashi, which is largely dedicated to PC gaming. It's like an emporium of all things PC gaming, with everything from top-shelf components and accessories on offer (brands such as Razer, Asus, MSI, AMD, Intel, Nvidia and more) through to gaming monitors and cases.

THERE'S UNPRECEDENTED INFORMATION ON EACH COMPONENT

There's unprecedented (compared to the west) information on each component, too, with walls of monitors listing the precise specs. There's nothing like this in Europe or the USA, and it makes building a great gaming PC easy. Well worth checking out when you're next in Japan. ■

dospara.co.jp

STRANGE SHADOW

Death Stranding encounters Attack on Titan

After the big success of spooky horror game *Platform 8*, Kotake Create (a talented studio from Kyoto) has finally revealed some details of their new upcoming title: *Strange Shadow*.

Developed with Unreal 5, the game starts with your spaceship crashing on an unknown planet, where you'll then proceed to be hunted by gigantic monsters of various kinds.

For those who are familiar with Hajime Isayama's Attack on Titan manga, there are quite a few similarities, as in this run-and-hide thrill game you'll have to find a way to not only save your life, but also discover a way to escape from the whole planet! Coming 2025. ■

TOWER OF DRUAGA

A special 40th anniversary limited edition

Bandai Namco created a special box set for the 40th anniversary of *Tower of Druaga*, which was made by legendary Japanese game dev, Masanobu Endō, who the likes of Hideo Kojima and Shigeru Miyamoto have paid tribute to as a major inspiration.

The limited-edition box includes four books totalling over 1,200 pages, which include *Tower of Druaga*'s game proposal document, as well as a smorgasbord of illustrations, developer commentary and interviews, an original soundtrack CD and a reprinted instruction card for the game.

The box costs 25,000 yen (~$250), and will be available only through the Bandai Namco Japanese site. ■

POST-FINAL FANTASY

FANTASIAN NEO DIMENSION is finally out on PC

By the time you read this, the last game from the father of all the JRPGs, Hironobu Sakaguchi (the man behind the whole *Final Fantasy* Saga), will be out and playable on PC via Steam.

Originally funded by Apple in 2018 and released four years later on Mac in two parts, *Fantasian Neo Dimension* on PC comes with a series of improvements and optimisations, including 4K graphics and an English language dub, as well as three difficulty levels (the Mac release only had one, and it was hard).

The game's score is composed by the iconic Nobou Uematsu and, in terms of quality, is once again at the highest level. The entire soundtrack is available on Spotify for free, too.

4K graphics and an English dub are now available.

ADVERTORIAL

WHY ASUS' NEW GAMING NUCS COULD BE A PC GAMER'S DREAM

IMMENSE GAMING POWER IN A SMALL AND QUIET WONDER BOX.

Not all PC gamers want big computers – but not all of them want gaming laptops, either. The good news is that now that Asus has taken over Intel's mini NUC PC business, the use cases for NUCs have stretched way beyond boring office applications and digital signage: they're now perfect for gamers who want a small footprint PC that's got it where it counts. Say hello to the new NUCs for Gaming, codename... Scorpion Canyon.

NUC NUC, WHO'S THERE?

Back in ye olden days, gaming PCs were cherished if they sounded like a hovercraft starting up – the noise meant they were fast. Not surprisingly, this got old quickly and wanting a silent computer eventually became the norm. However, while performance increased over time, so did the heat generated by the components, which led to there being a stand-off between performance and stability: putting powerful components in small, poorly ventilated chassis led to overheating and crashing.

Fortunately, nowadays, modern CPUs and GPUs have become far more power efficient and require less cooling than just a few years ago. This has opened the door to installing powerful gaming components in NUC (short for Next Unit of Computing) mini-PCs. Major benefits include not taking up much room on a desk, and portability without buying a whole gaming laptop (with redundant keyboard, trackpad, speakers, screen etc) to connect to your existing keyboard, mouse and monitor.

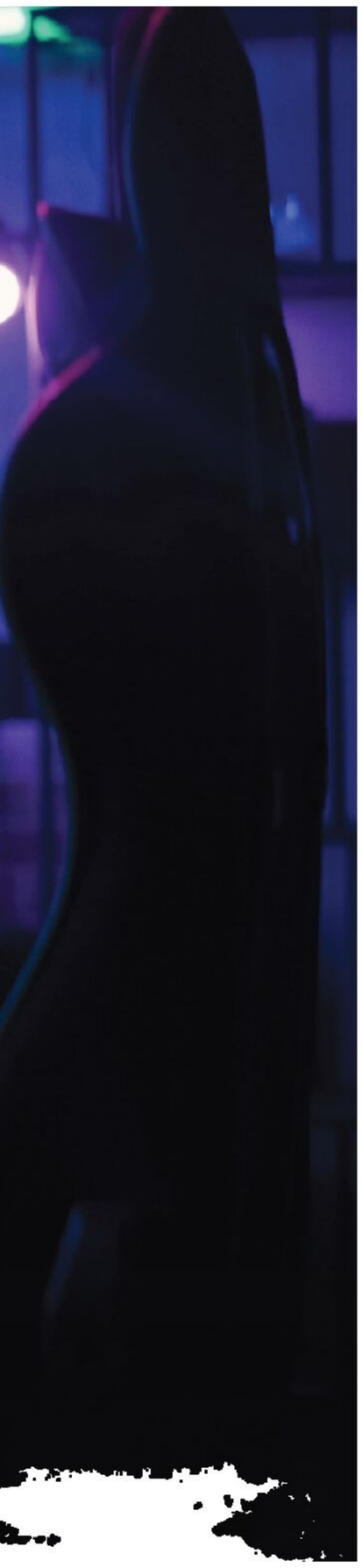
PACKING IN THE BEST

Asus' new Scorpion Canyon NUC Performance models deliver stunning performance. They feature Intel Core Ultra processors and Nvidia GeForce RTX GPUs. The tiny 2.5-litre chassis (dimensions: 180 x 270 x 60mm) have two SODIMM slots which support up to 2x32GB of the latest DDR5-5600 RAM and have three PCIe NVMe hard drive slots (one of which may come populated by participating retailers). The insides are easily accessible for future upgrades – you just slide-off the top lid.

There are two main models: the wallet-friendly NUC Performance 760 features an Intel Core Ultra 7 155H processor and an 8GB Nvidia RTX 4060 GPU; the NUC Performance 970 switches up to an Intel Core Ultra 9 185H processor and 8GB Nvidia GeForce RTX 4070 graphics.

There's very generous connectivity for both, including an HDMI 2.1 port, two DisplayPort 1.4a ports, a Thunderbolt 4 port, four USB-A 3.2 Gen 2 ports, 2.5Gbps Ethernet, an SD card reader, a 3.5mm audio jack, plus Wi-Fi 6E (with low-latency Killer networking enhancements) and Bluetooth 5.3. That's better than most cutting-edge gaming laptops and means you can connect up-to five 4K monitors at once!

Internal cooling utilises Asus' vapour chamber and heat pipe thermal technologies enabling the CPU to boost up to 85W cTDP, or



Despite gamers being front of mind, **the new NUCs will equally suit power users, streamers and creators who also want a powerful, mobile, desktop PC** – which could even augment their existing set-up.

115W + 25W Dynamic Boost for the GPU respectively – which is, again, better than many, thermally limited gaming laptops.

Fans idle at 29dBA and generally sit around 37dBA when gaming. Gaming features are controlled by Asus' powerful and intuitive Armoury Crate app, while the MyAsus app maintains your system drivers and provides access to self-diagnostic and aftersales support, if required.

Other features include a blank logo mask which can be customised with your own design; an external power brick to keep PSU heat away from the insides. Asus also bundles a stand that enables you to mount it horizontally or vertically on your desk and there's a three-year warranty for peace of mind.

THE DO-IT-ALL PC

Despite gamers being front of mind, NUC performance will equally suit power users, streamers and creators who also want a powerful, mobile, desktop PC – which could even augment their existing set-up. Streamers will like the Intel processor's NPU which can provide AI-driven noise removal.

When used in conjunction with Asus' ROG Raikiri Pro game controller, the NUC's performance is perfect as a portable console. The controller features an OLED display, four rear buttons, selectable step triggers (that can be set to short or long-range modes), an ESS DAC (for enhanced audio), customisable joystick sensitivity and three modes of connectivity: USB-C, 2.4GHz Wi-Fi and Bluetooth. There's also a 3.5mm audio jack and a built-in, customisable, OLED display that can show custom logos and animations or status indicators. Battery life extends up to 48 hours.

Built for gamers, these ultra-small, ultra-powerful systems offer an unparalleled combination of superior performance, riveting visuals and fast and flexible connectivity. Find out more at **www.asus.com/au/displays-desktops/nucs/nuc-kits/asus-nuc-14-performance/**

GET YOUR ASUS GAMING NUC NOW!

COMPUTER ALLIANCE

MWAVE

PLE

Incoming

THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

1 month

INDIANA JONES AND THE GREAT CIRCLE

RELEASE December 8, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Machine Games

Indy's back with a new whip-cracking adventure that is set between the events of Raiders of the Lost Ark and Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. Hype!

ASSETTO CORSA EVO

RELEASE January 16, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** KUNOS Simulazioni

A driving simulator geared towards hyper realism, *EVO* promises plenty of top marques and racing thrills, with different classes spanning across the history of motoring.

SNIPER ELITE: RESISTANCE

RELEASE January 30, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Rebellion

The violent sniper simulator returns, promising new stealth and tactical third-person combat mechanics, as well as a fresh campaign set within the heart of WWII-era France.

2 months

SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION VII

RELEASE February 11, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Firaxis Games

The latest instalment in the long-running 4X strategy series, *Civ VII* lets you create kingdoms and rule as many legendary leaders throughout history.

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

RELEASE February 14, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Quebec

Finally, the assassination sim series goes to Japan, with players stepping into the shoes of samurai, Yasuke, and shinobi ninja, Naoe. Slice and dice.

AVOWED

RELEASE February 18, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Obsidian

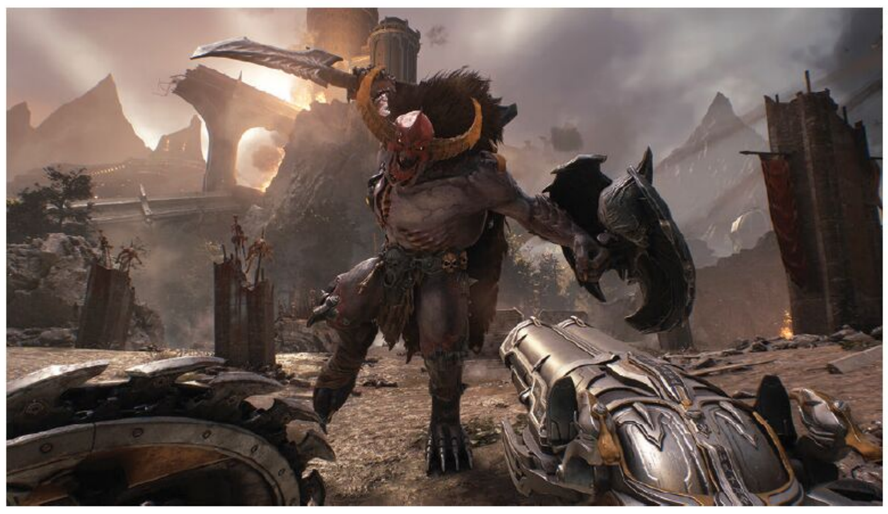
The anticipated first-person fantasy RPG that is definitely not like *Skyrim*. A small delay means genre fans can now look forward to playing it in February 2025.

3 months

CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Sandfall Interactive

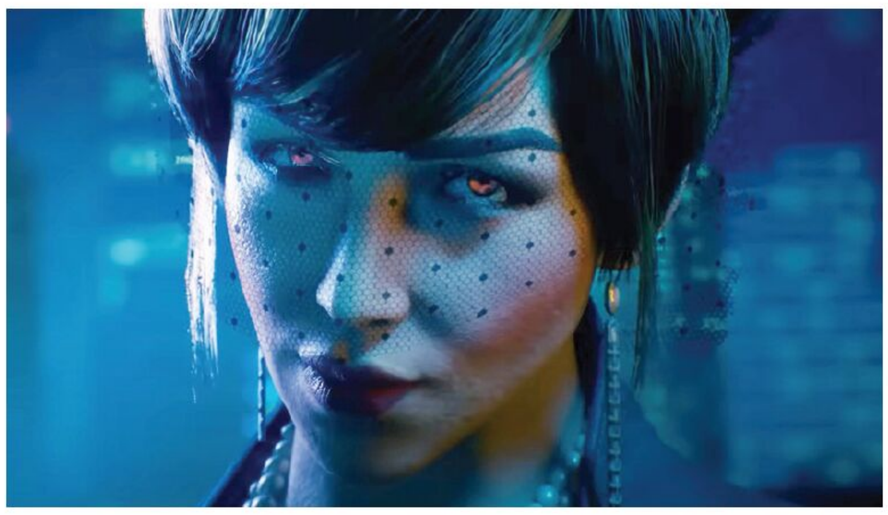
Lead the members of Expedition 33 on their quest to destroy the Paintress so that she can never paint death again. Dark fantasy, turn-based RPG.



DOOM: THE DARK AGES

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** id Software

Doom goes historical, with the player stepping into the shoes of a living super weapon who fights in a hyper-violent medieval war against hell. Heavy metal guaranteed.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room

Despite development troubles and multiple delays to its release date, we remain hopeful that this first-person World of Darkness RPG has proper fangs.

4 months+

FALLING FRONTIER

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Stutter Fox Studios

Conquer a vast, procedurally generated star system in this sci-fi RTS where gathering intel and ensuring efficient logistics are key factors to victory.

BLADE

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Arkane Lyon

From the talented devs who brought PC gamers the *Dishonored* series, Marvel's daywalker is set for a mature, singleplayer, third-person adventure game.

GTA VI

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Rockstar Studios

Everything we're hearing right now points to the next *Grand Theft Auto* launching in 2025. But whether or not that includes PC is unknown. Come on Rockstar, sort it out!

MOD

BONE DADDY

Larian Studios unlocking official mod support for *Baldur's Gate III* has seen thousands of mods released by gamers. One of those, though, is a mod to change Withers' name to, um, 'Bone Daddy', which over 10,000 gamers have done so far. If you're inclined to join them, you can grab the mod here: shorturl.at/9kq1n

Arc Raiders

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC	Embark Studios	Embark Studios	arcraiders.com

ARC RAIDERS

The extraction shooter that finally brings the genre to the masses?

What scares me? In real life, the answer to this is heights and octopuses, but when it comes to videogames there's nothing quite as scary as a robot: inhuman metal enemies that can soak up an unknown amount of punishment and just keep on coming.

It's robots that are the scariest thing you'll face in *Arc Raiders*, a PvPvE extraction shooter set in a post apocalyptic future where a robotic menace has driven mankind deep underground, only emerging to try and get supplies from the ruined world above. It's the latest game from *The Finals* developer Embark Studios, and it feels like it could be a perfect entry in the extraction genre if you've not played one yet. It's fun but it also just stands out with several good ideas and a distinct visual style. After a few hours spent with the game's closed beta this past weekend, I think a core part of the appeal is the robots, the 'Arc' that give *Arc Raiders* its name.

Compared to the poorly-armed mercenaries and malnourished scavengers you're usually throwing down with in the extraction genre, *Arc Raiders* offers a unique experience, a little sci-fi flavouring to a game that sets it apart from others in the genre.

The scouts are manageable: tiny quadcopters that are easily disabled by knocking out a couple of their rotors with carefully aimed shots. Everything past that is a serious threat if you don't pay attention: wall-mounted sentries catch you out in dark corridors, floating gunships remind me of the Terminator universe's Hunter Killer drones. There's a weird ball that explodes in a gout of flame when you get close to it.

Taken separately these are easy to deal with, but when you're keeping an eye out for other players – who are more often than not likely to shoot you on sight – and scuffling around like a truffle pig that has been trained from birth to find valuable loot, you can quickly find yourself in situations that threaten to erupt into a full-on crisis.

There are two ways to extract from an *Arc Raiders* match that I've found so far. The safest option seems to be the cargo hatches that require you to bring a key into a match that will allow you to sneak away to safety. The more common option is sluggish cargo lifts that take things from the surface down into the depths below. Calling a lift triggers a wailing siren that will draw in every robot and enemy player within a mile radius, all desperate to take a bite out of you. Survival feels like a little miracle every time you extract with your ill-gotten gains.

PLAYED IT

BEAUTIFUL GAME

But that's the danger, of which there is lots. I found I didn't mind, because *Arc Raiders* is a beautiful game and traversing the maps that make up its world is a joy. Each map contains a mix of partially destroyed buildings and interesting terrain that means firefights have tons of verticality. One encounter in a research lab had me fighting off an opposing duo of players while Arc drones lazily buzzed past the windows hosing automatic fire at whichever of us they could see. After I'd killed one of the pair and backed myself into a small room with every wall open to some form of threat, I opted to leap from the window and hope I landed on something on the way down that would break my fall non-lethally. It didn't work out, and I pancaked myself into the ground. So it goes.

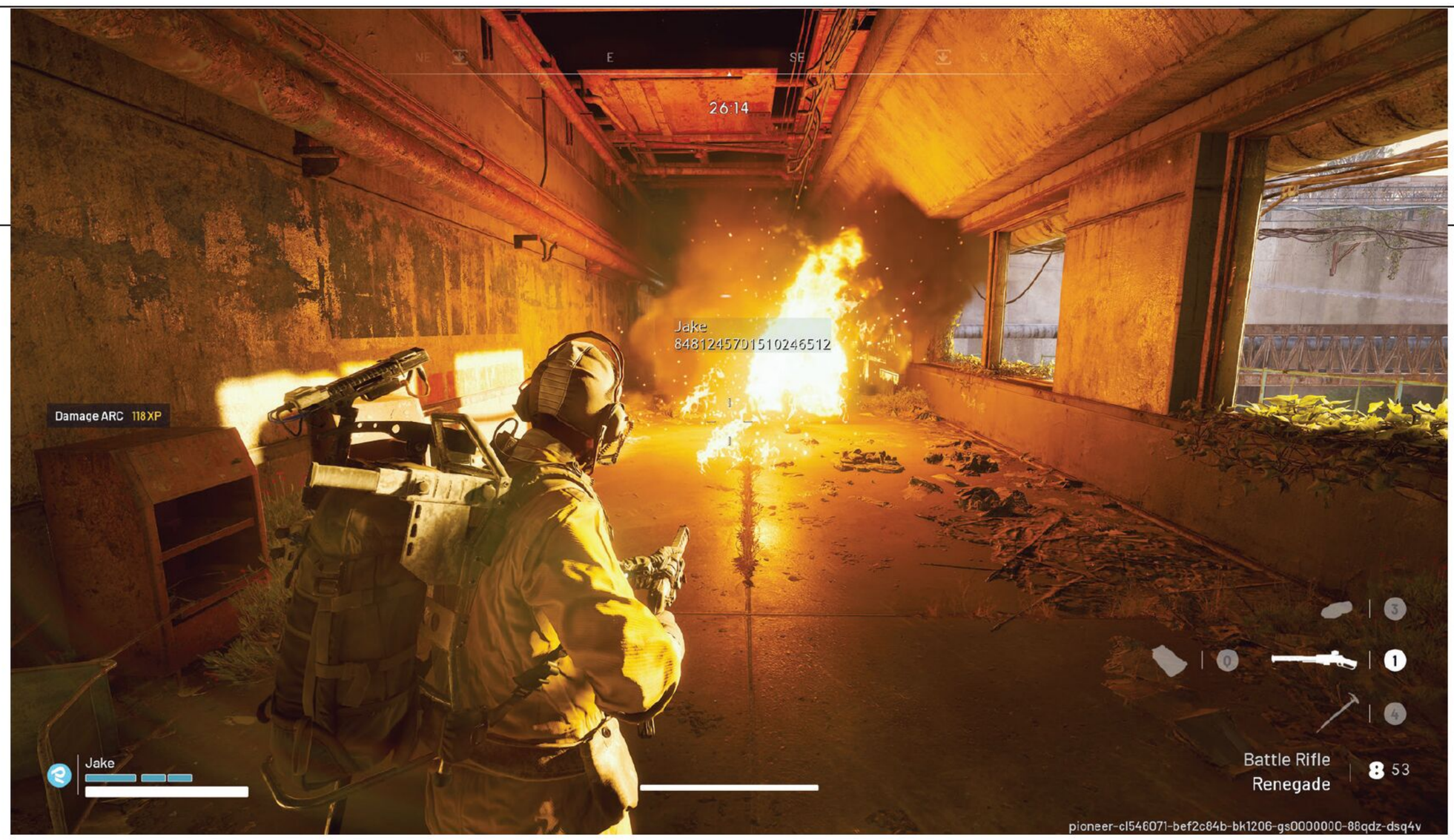
A spaceport level had me fighting around the base of a giant rocket, and saw me struggling to balance my urge to survive with my inability to stop looking up at the sheer majesty of the thing. This happened fairly regularly, and at least in my time with the beta I

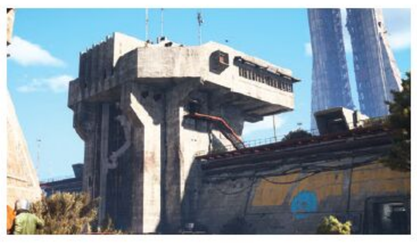
A LITTLE SCI-FI FLAVOURING TO A GAME THAT SETS IT APART FROM OTHERS IN THE GENRE

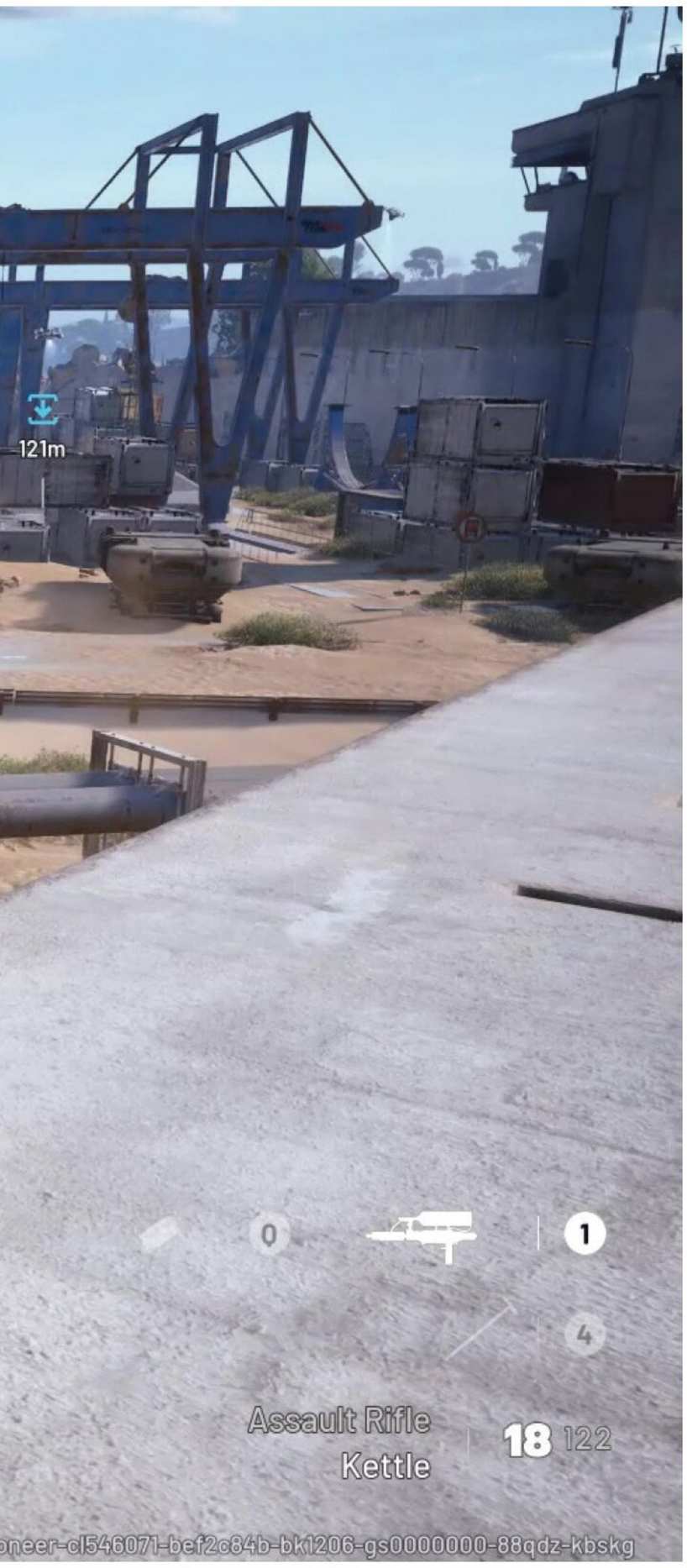
Arc Raiders

RIGHT: Remember kids, never fart around open flames.

BELOW: [In the *Unreal Tournament* announcer voice] "HEAD SHOT!"







found the thrill of discovery overtaking my fear of the unknown.

I could write a thousand words here about how much I love the look of *Arc Raiders* and not accurately describe its beauty, so just look at the screenshots contained in this article and realise that in motion it really works and feels like an active push against the realism of extraction shooters at the moment. *Escape from Tarkov* and *Arena Breakout: Infinite* present the same kind of grim, war-torn decay as *DayZ*. *Arc Raiders* swings the pendulum the other way: there's a hopeful optimism to the look of this world where the robots won, a retro sci-fi aesthetic not just in *Arc Raiders*' cool-as-hell promotional art, but in the backpack you wear that's built on a real steel frame so you can hold more weight, or in the weird headgears you can choose to wear with your cosmetics and the weapons you wield.

FUTURE IMPERFECT

If I have one concern it's that the weapons don't feel particularly punchy, and although they all have cool designs, they don't look like real-life counterparts which makes it harder to intuit their functions and personalities. An M4, we're told in games from *Call of Duty* to *Escape from Tarkov*, fires quickly and accurately but does a bit less damage than an AK47. The starter assault rifle in *Arc Raiders* looks like the designers of a paintball gun and a cordless Dyson got high one night and decided to get real weird. It's only through experimentation that I'll come to understand how effective it's supposed to be compared to the rest of *Arc Raiders*' arsenal.

None of this would matter but it felt like I could empty an entire magazine of 'light' ammo into one of the floating Arc attackers and barely make a scratch. It's hard to tell if you're doing damage with your rounds, short of things falling off the Arc attackers in tense situations, and it can be frustrating sometimes to try to understand what you need to do to kill the robots. This is partially my own fault: one interesting quirk to tooling yourself up is that guns that are good at killing players and guns good at killing robots are not one and the same, with each weapon telling you not just how much damage it does, but how good it is at doing damage to Arc opponents. Still, it's one thing to read 'low Arc armour piercing' on a menu screen, and another to be crouching behind cover firing every round you have at a godless killing machine that's keen to wreck your world.

If you're carrying something light, your only hope against the bigger Arc's is to dodge and move. This is made easier because moving around in *Arc Raiders* is just so much damn fun. The movement system feels empowering and it's easy for you to vault over low obstacles, hop around on a zipline or even just clamber up most of the obstacles you encounter.

The movement makes things feel a little more kinetic, and papers over some of the cracks in the combat from when bullets don't hit that hard. Hurling yourself down between some cover during the close-range firefights feels phenomenal. Seeing a vantage point in the distance and yomping over there to clamber up it feels rewarding, and sight lines are typically pretty long so you'll often be rewarded.

My only real reservation is that player vs player combat in third-person always feels a little bit naff. It's full of players shuffling back and forwards, abusing the third-person camera to get a decent angle on players. We saw this a lot in *PUBG* when it first launched and it really does rob the game of a certain competitive je ne sais quoi. I'm a little more relaxed here, because *Arc Raiders* doesn't feel like it's particularly PvP focused.

THERE'S A HOPEFUL OPTIMISM TO THE LOOK OF THIS WORLD WHERE THE ROBOTS WON

FRIENDLIER AESTHETIC

After a couple of hours with *Arc Raiders*' closed test, I'm left with two key thoughts. The first is that *Arc Raiders* could be something very special indeed, a more accessible extraction shooter with a friendlier aesthetic that can still deliver the pulse-pounding spectacle *Tarkov* players crave. The second is that Embark Studios, developers of both *Arc Raiders* and last year's *The Finals*, might be one of the most exciting studios in the world right now. With both this game and *The Finals*, they've shown a clear understanding of what makes shooters tick along with a suite of compelling ideas for how to improve genres no one else is really innovating in. For that reason alone, *Arc Raiders* is one to watch: it recently pivoted from free-to-play to premium, and Embark plans to launch it next year.

Jake Tucker

The Thing Remastered

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
December 5, 2024

DEVELOPER
Nightdive, Computer Artworks

PUBLISHER
Nightdive Studios

LINK
nightdivestudios.com

THE THING REMASTERED

The rose tint in these glasses is wearing thin

I had no idea what to expect from *The Thing Remastered*. I've always been a fan of the film, but I was far too young to play the original game back in 2002, so I was excited to get a chance to see what all the fuss was about for myself.

Dropping into Outpost 31 in Antarctica, my rag-tag group and I had the simple goal of evacuating survivors and eliminating enemies. This seemed simple enough, but as I said before, I've seen the movie, so I knew what was going to be waiting for me around the next corner (hint: there are shape-shifting killer alien life forms around).

But before heading into the research facility, I decided the best course of action would be to get a bearing on my surroundings. This is when I came across the Blair-Thing's UFO, which was hidden underneath the toolshed, just like in the film. It was an exciting discovery, but I was quickly brought back down to Earth by the protagonist, Captain JF Blake, shrugging it off with a snarky comment, "Yeah yeah, we're not alone in the universe and all that crap – check it out and move it on." Way to kill the mood, Blake.

UNWITTING WIT

From this point onwards, it was clear that my time in this game was going to be a unique experience. *The Thing Remastered* is a faithful restoration of the 2002 game, so I wasn't expecting a complete overhaul, but I do think the developers missed a trick in not daring to update certain aspects like the voice acting or the script. It's tough because I like this game for the wrong reasons. There were plenty of hilarious and cool moments that are befitting of any action hero, like running through aircraft hangers taking on soldiers with flamethrowers while also fending off mutated beasts. But it was also unintentionally funny, far too much for me to take any of it seriously.

CHASING MUTANTS

There were a few instances when I had no idea what else to do other than laugh. At one point, I found myself chasing mutants into a blizzard like some Benny Hill sketch, only to trigger a completely different cutscene that would plonk me somewhere entirely different. I never saw those alien shape-shifters again. Another moment that's stuck with me was likely meant to be a heartfelt interaction between Blake and Pierce up in the weather tower. My character begged Pierce to try and hang on, to fight the infection, and not to give in and turn into one of those monsters, only for Pierce to look me in the eyes and go, "My dad always said if you need something done right do it yourself," and then shoot himself in the head.

PLAYED IT

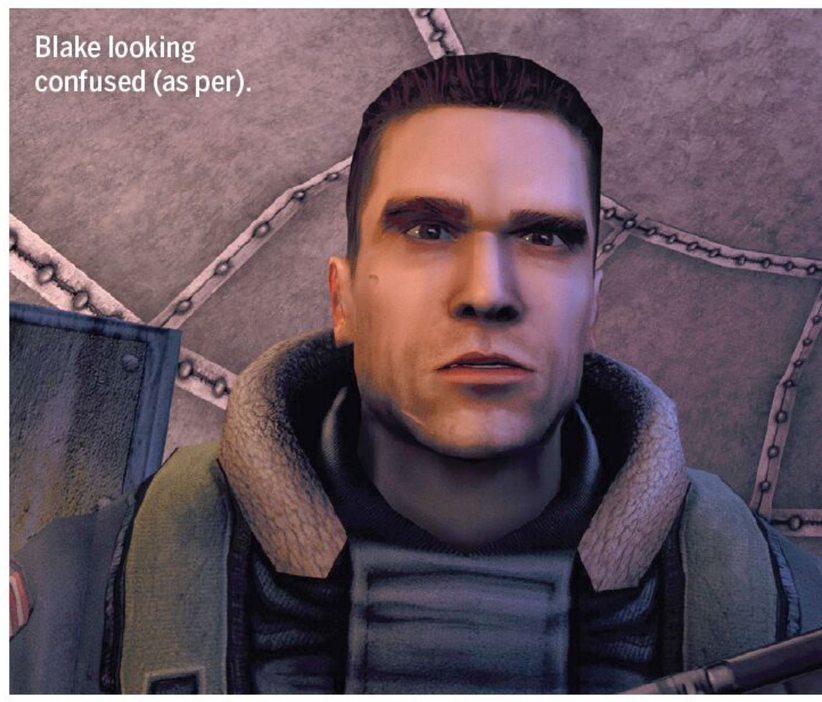
The Thing Remastered felt like more of a dark comedy than a horror survival game because of these ridiculous and poorly scripted moments that were spattered throughout the game. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but if you're looking for something that'll scare you, it's best to look elsewhere.

Even still, some clear improvements were made. The guns handle better, the game runs really well on my RTX 3070, and the graphics look clean while keeping the scruffy, pixelated charm of the original. There were also some interesting puzzles that almost always ended in the wrong person getting eaten and then mutating into yet another monster.

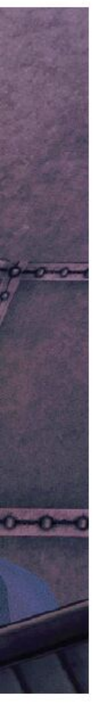
Even though *The Thing Remastered* didn't scare me or particularly feel like much of a survival game, it was still fun and a great way to experience what the director, John Carpenter, viewed as the canon sequel to the 1982 film.

Elie Gould

THE GRAPHICS LOOK CLEAN WHILE KEEPING THE SCRUFFY CHARM OF THE ORIGINAL



Blake looking confused (as per).



ABOVE: Blake finding a mutilated corpse on a table. Just another day at the office.

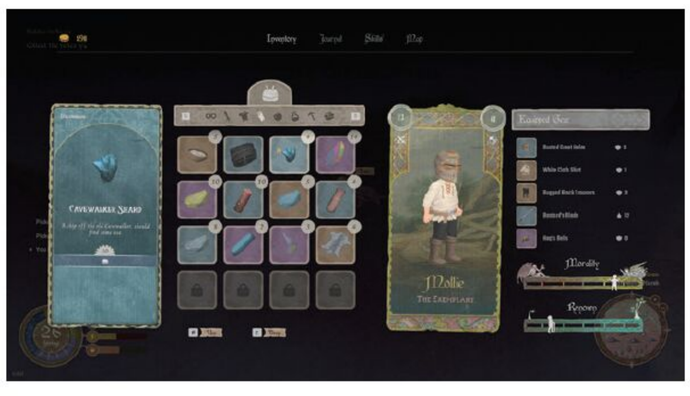
LEFT: Trapping two monsters in holding cells because I ran out of bullets.

Mirthwood

ABOVE: Don't mind me, fella, you don't need this carrot surely?

RIGHT: His hammer was in a tree, by the way. No, I don't know how.

Water Under the Bridge
Locate Ashmire
Done talking
Clayton
My hammer, and still in one piece! Bless ye. Here, take this bar. And come back tomorrow, I shall have my shop back in order.
Brightoak
7
Spring



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
November 6, 2024	Bad Ridge Games	V Publishing	badridgegames.com

MIRTHWOOD

Trying my best to live out a medieval peasant fantasy

There are times when videogames mirror real life. In *Mirthwood*'s case, it's the fact that I'm always hungry. A bread chunk barely lasts me a few axe thwacks at a tree, and a baked apple carries me for a few steps before my stomach is growling at me once more.

It's a real vibe-killer in my ongoing desire to fulfil my cosy medieval peasant fantasy, and only one of many things making an attempt on my life. The game advertises itself as a life sim RPG, but it often feels more like a survival game.

I'm making it sound like I don't like *Mirthwood*, but I do. Bad Ridge Games is a two-person team, and it's crafted something that could be special. It's a delightfully darker take on your *Stardews*, throwing my farmer into a dreary town with a beaten-up shack and some ratty clothes. There are some origin-related questions at the beginning – social status, career, where I hark from – but they're flavour text and minor stat changes than anything super-involved.

Finding my way around and speaking to some of the townsfolk leads me to some tools, with a background narrative bubbling away that investigates some more mystical elements with wraiths and werewolves. I'm able to patch up my house, plant crops and work towards improving my tools, while camps beyond my usual homestead offer up extra decorating and agricultural opportunities.

Mirthwood is home to some genuinely fantastic vibes. I love its old painterly style with characters that move like those antique pop-up books, and the bardcore flute soundtrack that makes me want to cosy up next to the fire while drinking some warm spiced mead.

It also feels unique in that I don't have to totally rely on farming if I don't want to. In fact, most of my time with *Mirthwood* has been spent exploring the lands – foraging, fighting and looting my way through forests and caves to generate money and sustain my health and stamina. Days and seasons tick away but I'm not given an arbitrary curfew I must abide by lest I pass out. As long as I have enough energy to keep myself going, with some extra potions or food-related top-ups, I can go days without sleeping.

DAYS AND SEASONS TICK AWAY BUT I'M NOT GIVEN AN ARBITRARY CURFEW

PEASANT'S QUEST

I didn't realise how freeing it was to not be tied to your typical farming sim-mandated bedtime. I lost a little sense of structure and routine, sure, but it also made me more inclined to explore pretty far out in *Mirthwood*'s surprisingly spacious map.

It's got all the trappings of a cosy medieval life sim, but right now the whole thing comes wrapped up with more frustratingly opposing aspects. As it stands, combat feels pretty rancid – I can only attack left or right, enemies constantly jump backwards to avoid attacks which make fights a pain in the backside, and unblockable attacks are telegraphed with an incredibly short flash of an exclamation mark, leaving no opportunity to appropriately dodge.

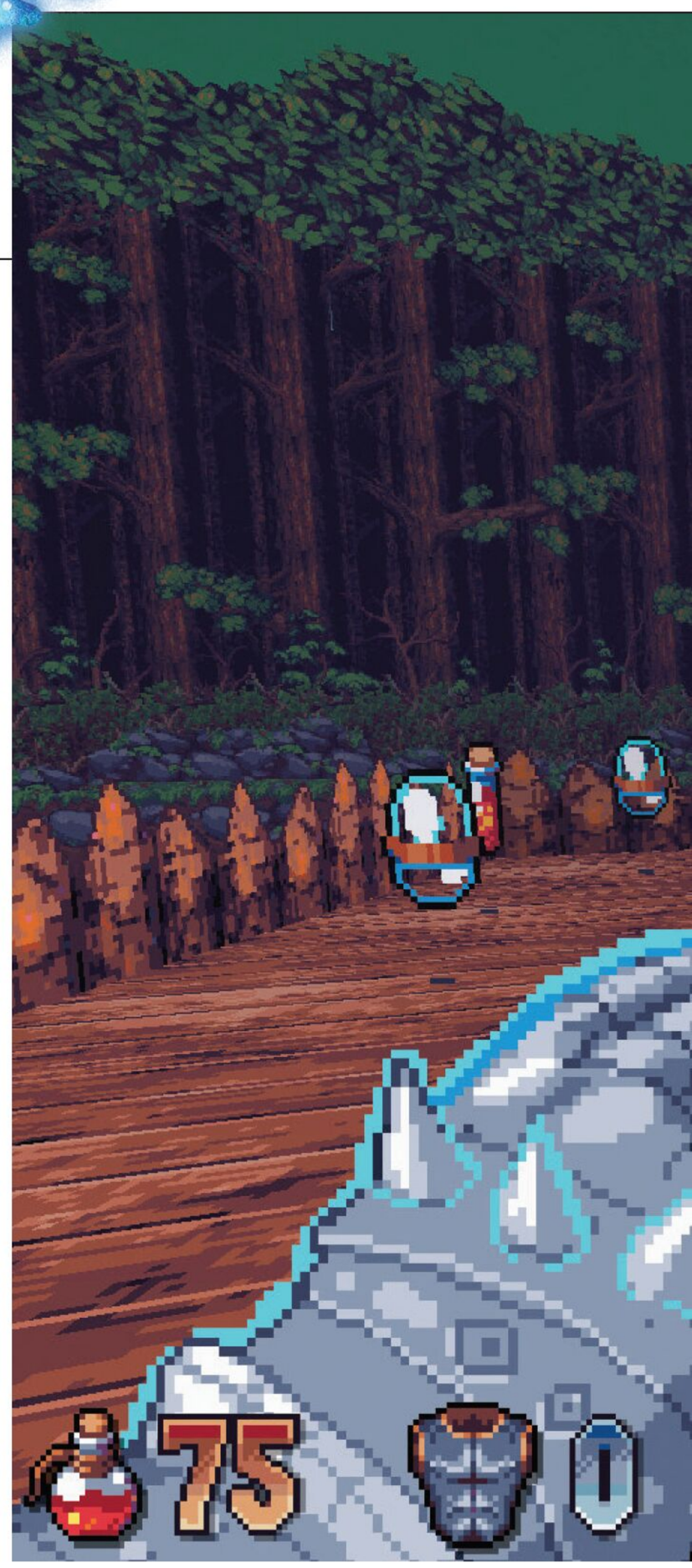
PLAYED IT

Quests are often obtuse, with easier vague areas marked or nothing marked at all, which has left me wandering around looking for a specific NPC more often than I'd like. I wouldn't mind as much if I could leave a scattering of pins whenever I came across someone or something, but it only gives me a single waymark that doesn't even appear on the minimap.

Mirthwood is definitely a game that needs a little more time in the oven. Bad Ridge Games is doing a pretty good job of putting out some quick patches at the moment, and the duo is active over on the game's Discord. It's certainly a game I'll be returning to, though maybe in a few months when some of the more glaring fun-suckers have been fixed up.

Mollie Taylor

Wizordum



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Out now

DEVELOPER
Emberheart Games

PUBLISHER
Apogee Entertainment

LINK
shorturl.at/BM4ws

WIZORDUM

Hexen and Heretic are reborn in this first-person spellcaster

With its glorious '90s-style graphics, rapid boomer shooter action, and delightfully on-point publisher of Apogee Entertainment, *Wizordum* recaptures the flavour of classic fantasy FPS games like *Heretic* and *Hexen* with aplomb.

And that recapturing also includes the frustration of not knowing where that one sodding switch is that opens the one sodding door you need to go through in order to progress the game. Unlike the '90s, though, the internet (and specifically YouTube) exists, so getting help is a lot easier than ringing the *Wizordum* tips hotline.

That's good, as when you're not getting stuck finding the silver key to open the silver door, or that elusive switch that actually looks like a wall decoration, in *Wizordum* you're flying through a series of brightly coloured fantasy levels, ranging from villages to castles, through graveyards, swamps and dungeons, and onto woods and more, dishing out doom to its demonic denizens as a Cleric or Sorceress.

Each character has their own unique weapons and powers, and there's plenty of fun to be found in the arsenals, ranging from magic ice wands and holy maces, to fireball rings, blunderbuss guns, orb bombs, chain lightning gauntlets and more, each tapping into its own separate ammo resource. On top of these attacks are a series of magic scrolls and items, collectable throughout, which allow the user to unleash powerful attacks, which often lean into area damage.

As one of the last Mages of the Wizordum sanctuary, your quest here is to find the source of the Chaos corruption that is consuming the kingdom and put an end to it. And, while that source shall remain cloaked for this preview, the minions of chaos are numerous, ranging from typical fantasy fair like goblins, zombies and skeleton warriors, through to bats, spiders and giant rats, and on to more Cthulu-friendly abominations such as giant tentacles. Dispatching these fiends effectively means making use of your arsenal wisely and, of course, keeping moving at all costs.

PUMMELLING YOUR FOES WITH MAGICAL DEATH UNTIL YOU REACH THE EXIT DOOR

PLAYED IT

BOOMER SPELLCASTER

At its heart the gameplay loop in *Wizordum* is pure boomer shooter. You move fast, dodge obstacles and strafe enemies, all the while pummelling your foes with magical death until you reach the exit door on each level. But this core is expanded upon some not just by the vast array of collectibles available on each level, which range from health-granting potions and foods, to armour and ammo, and onto vast swathes of treasure, but also a number of secrets, both visible and invisible, that require exploration to acquire. These force a change of pace, and that's a benefit to the experience, which I feel could become a little one note without.

And you will want to pick up all the treasure you can, as in-between levels any treasure found is converted into a spendable bank balance, which can then be used to upgrade weapons or unlock new ones in a sort of magical Waitrose for mages. An early upgrade, for example, unlocks an alternate attack for the Cleric's mace, which allows it to be charged up to deal extra damage and impact nearby foes and objects in an area effect manner. Eventually, you'll be buying gauntlets that let you hurl chain lightning at your foes as if you were Emperor Palpatine.

Right now, for an Early Access game, *Wizordum* offers plenty of magical bang for your buck, with a brace of official episodes available, as well as a level editor to make your own and play other people's creations.

Robert Jones

This guy definitely doesn't floss.

Wizordum

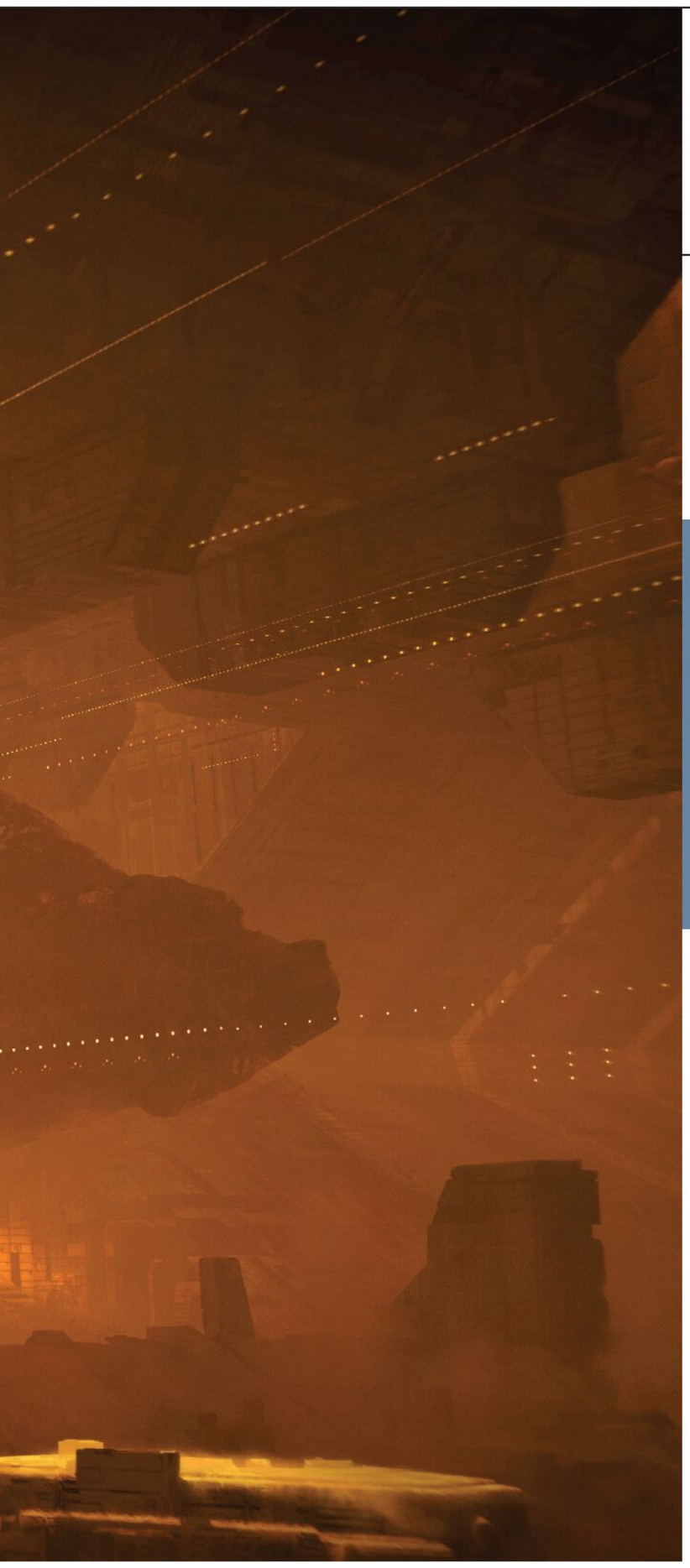
ABOVE: Unlimited power!!!!!

LEFT: Bloody mace, meet goblin head.

EVE Frontier

ABOVE: CCP claims, almost unbelievably, that it's testing a universe with a potential two million solar systems.

RIGHT: *Frontier* has been through various beta phases, and is currently in a playtest.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC (in beta)	CCP	CCP	evefrontier.com

EVE FRONTIER

Not a blockchain game, it just uses the old blockchain thing...

OK, let's start with the 'B' word: *EVE Frontier* is a blockchain game. If that makes your eyes glaze over you're not alone, because blockchain has been little but a buzzword for rubbish games that all seem to have an element of the cash-grab to them. But developer CCP, albeit cautious, thinks it has something to offer.

EVE Frontier is "not a blockchain game [but] a game that utilises blockchain", and what sets it apart is the heritage of *EVE Online* itself. To my mind the most remarkable MMO out there, *EVE Online*'s player-led philosophy makes it a giant ongoing social experiment, riven with chaos and opportunity, and *Frontier* aims to somehow take this further.

The basic idea is a survival game controlled in a meaningful way by players, where they'll have the capability to create in-game structures via coding, establish their own currencies, and ultimately exert control over a deeply hostile environment. Like *EVE Online*, *Frontier* takes place on a single shared server. The universe contains one central resource – Crude Matter – that powers everything. Beyond that it's up to the players where this goes.

To get right down to it, the big idea here is using blockchain technology to enable third-party development within the game. In-game these are called Smart Assemblies, structures that are hard coded to obey the rules of the universe but can be programmed by players using HTML5, giving them new behaviours and purpose through a new CCP-developed tech called MUD running atop the Redstone blockchain. CCP essentially thinks that what this tech can do will soon make "blockchain" and all its associations fade into the background for players.

The Crude Matter resource is what this universe runs on.

THE UNIVERSE CONTAINS ONE CENTRAL RESOURCE THAT POWERS EVERYTHING

A MODDABLE MMO?

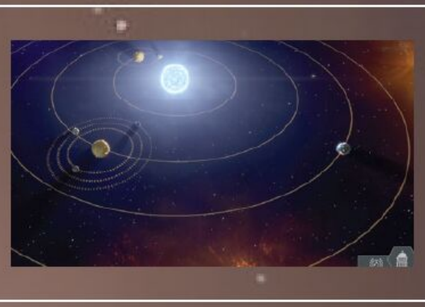
CCP has been testing the game with a limited subset of these tools, and mentions players already recreating *EVE Online*'s Alliance Tournament System, which may not seem like the most impressive example, but shows how players have been able to quickly recreate features they want without developer input. Pétursson says this "bodes extremely well for the future of this idea of creating an MMO which can be modded by players server-side, not just client-side".

That's before you get into the idea of player-run currencies. *Frontier* will have CCP-established currencies to start with but no restrictions on players and alliances setting up their own. "A little bit like when a sovereign nation issues their own legal tender," says CCP CEO Hilmarr Pétursson, but now in-game it's "woven into the fabric of reality. Anything that is powerful can be used for good or bad. In general, people seem to start with the bad: can we make it go boom? Well, we can, but we can do more. And you could almost argue with crypto games people did make them go boom, but you can also use it for something more sustainable. But again, that isn't really the value proposition. The value proposition is, here's an MMO you can mod on the server." The long-term goal is for *Frontier* to leave CCP's control, and become a fully decentralised player-built and maintained universe.

FIRST LOOK

What makes *Frontier* interesting is CCP's own history. This is a studio that's happy to hand the keys to the castle over to players, and it looks like this project could either become a frothing hellscape or a truly pioneering interactive experience. The unique proposition will certainly attract some, while others will just want to watch from the outside and see this world burn. Whatever happens, the one thing you can say for sure about *Frontier* is it won't be boring.

Rich Stanton



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025

DEVELOPER
Nebule Games

PUBLISHER
Nebule Games

LINK
beyondastra.com

BEYOND ASTRA

Strategy and more take over the galaxies of space

PC PowerPlay loves a 4X, and it's no wonder these sci-fi games are huge favourites, offering depth, extended playtimes, and the feeling that there's always something new out there. *Beyond Astra* takes its cues from the usual suspects and adds some spice of its own too.

An immediate thing that grabs you about *Beyond Astra* is the smooth zooming between open space and a planet's surface. The game's worlds themselves are adorable, tiny little spheres with different surface conditions covered in large buildings and clouds that bulge up from their surface like the 'tiny planet' photo-editing effect that twists a landscape into a ball. Asteroids and space habitats feature too, as well as megastructures such as Dyson rings and even a black hole.

There's a bit of *Spore* to be found in *Beyond Astra*'s DNA, as you'll define your species entirely from scratch, adapting to your home planet through skill trees before leaving it to build a glorious military empire on a shaky rocket that barely manages to defeat its home's gravity. Or a cultural one. Or force the galaxy to bow before your absolutely true religion. The idea of having a range of victory conditions may not be new, but it tells you something about the breadth of the game once you've made it to the stars.

FIRST LOOK

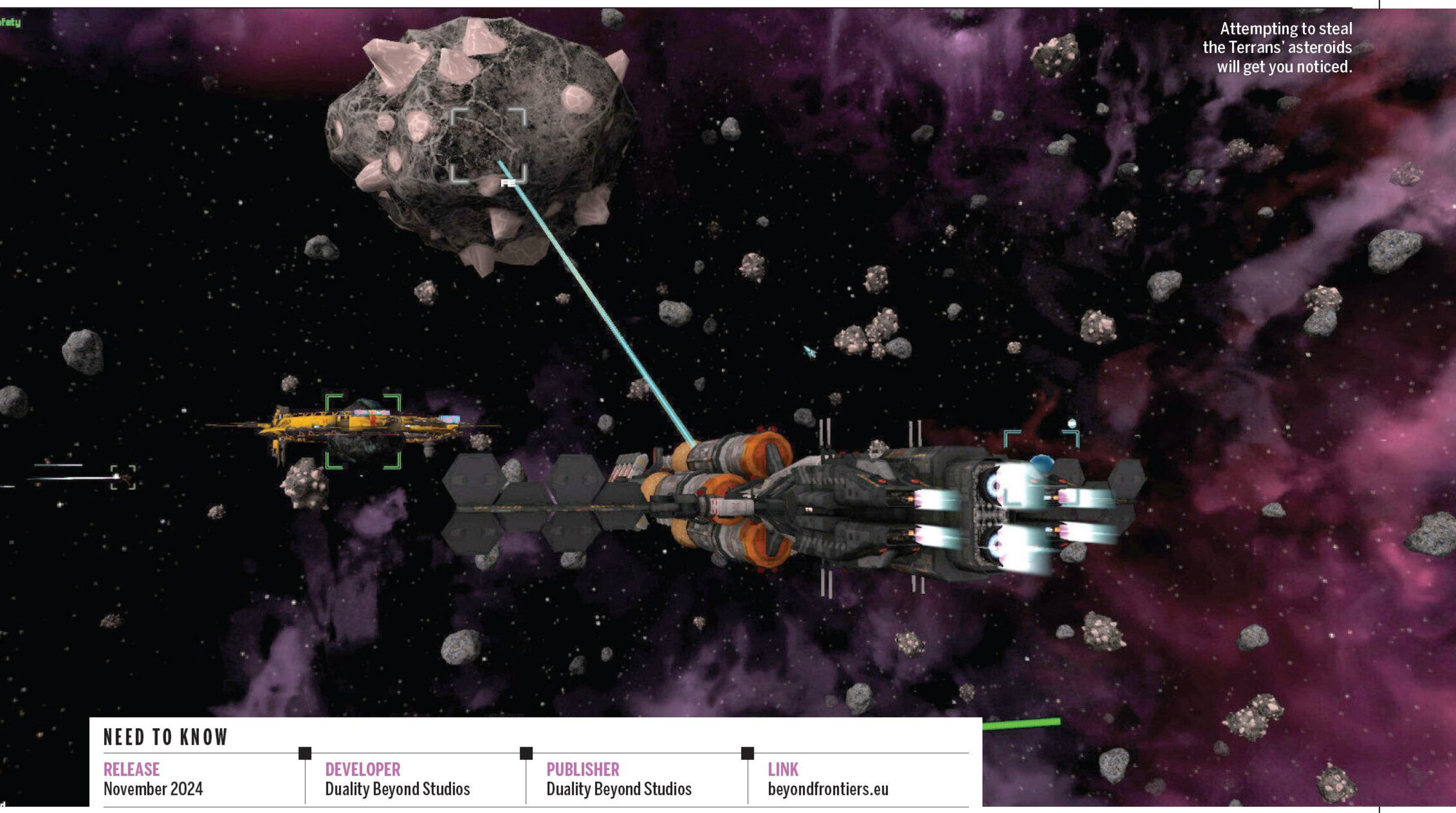
REVELATION SPACE

Space battles appear to be a bit of a *Beyond Astra* speciality. Its developer recognises the importance of glowing beam weapons to the genre, and they can be seen glittering in the dark between ships and down to a planet's surface. Ground forces aren't left out, with an RTS-style system for commanding them being implemented by the devs following the alpha preview.

Beyond Astra's mix of combat, culture, politics and even tourism means it stands out even among 4X games, and this looks like being an interesting new addition to the pantheon.

That stellar structure points to a Kardashev Type II civilisation.

By Ian Evenden



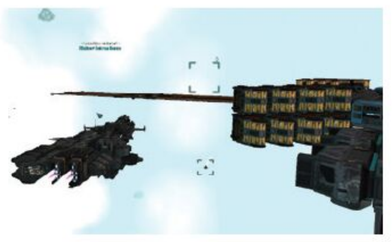
Attempting to steal the Terrans' asteroids will get you noticed.

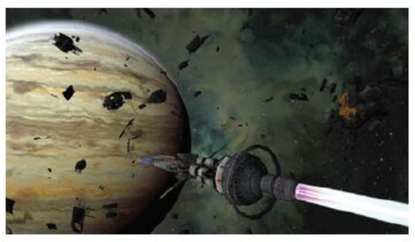
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
November 2024	Duality Beyond Studios	Duality Beyond Studios	beyondfrontiers.eu

BEYOND. FRONTIERS

Space adventure prepares for blast off





A comment on the Steam page for *Beyond. Frontiers* makes an extremely good point, "Not every space trading combat game has to be *Freelancer*". The influence that particular 21-year-old title has over the genre can't be overstated, however, and in *Beyond.Frontiers*' jumpgates and asteroid mining there's a definite resemblance.

PLAYED IT

Beyond.Frontiers is about to go into early access, and currently has a rather unstable demo available. Its dev team describes itself as having six members and zero years of experience, and there's a Patreon arrangement in place for funding.

Freelancer isn't the only influence on the game, with snippets of *Galaxy on Fire* and *Freespace 2* as well. In action, it's exactly the third-person space shooter you might want it to be, ships leaving drive trails behind them and even following a target cursor on screen like you're trying to play *Wing Commander* with the mouse.

ANOTHER FRONTIER

At the outset, you're asked to choose between three factions: the Terran Conglomerate, where money is power and corporations rule; the Sirius Dominion, who like democracy and exploration; and the Orion Council, a scrappy bunch of adventurers on the edge of explored space. Your choice here alters the system you start in and the amount of money you have, but also the extent of the mapped and defended territory around you.

From there, you can rise to power and lead your faction, get rich mining asteroids and trading, or set up on the border and defend it against pirates. There's a hint of *Elite Dangerous* in the way you pick up smaller-scale missions at space stations and outposts, so you can fly away from galactic campaigning for a while and just blast things. A large chunk of backstory is already in place, including an event – the stellar mirage – that has filled the heavens with colourful clouds (and makes for a more interesting backdrop than endless black void).

EXACTLY THE THIRD-PERSON SPACE SHOOTER YOU MIGHT WANT IT TO BE

Mod support will be baked into the game, the devs making the code available under the LGPL-2.1 licence for custom additions, while the game's config files can be tweaked as an easier method of making changes. Meanwhile, a page already exists for it on ModDB, and it will be interesting to see what kinds of sci-fi horrors a technically minded section of the community can serve up.

Also notable are the game's remarkably low system requirements, with the recommended GPU sitting at Intel HD 630 (launched in 2016 with the Kaby Lake generation of Core processors) which bodes very well for its performance on Steam Deck and the rest of the current range of handheld PCs. It's a title that could settle very well on the platform, offering a low-spec but extremely deep game.

Special offer

SUBSCRIBE TO *PCPP*

THE GO-TO RESOURCE FOR PC ENTHUSIASTS

DIGITAL EDITIONS ALSO AVAILABLE

SCAN ME

Simply scan the QR code above with your smartphone camera

THE ZINIO EDITION FOR ALL DEVICES FROM $6.99

ZINIO.COM/AU/PC-POWERPLAY-M5641

Two easy ways to subscribe to *PCPP* magazine:

VISIT www.techmags.com.au or CALL (02) 8227 6486

Special offer

SAVE UP TO 10% OFF THE NEWSSTAND PRICE

GET THE PRINT EDITION HOME DELIVERED

All the convenience of *PCPP* delivered direct to your door.

GET THE PRINT EDITION HOME DELIVERED FOR A YEAR FOR $89

TERMS & CONDITIONS: This offer expires February 24th 2025, and is available to subscribers within Australia only. Please allow 6-8 weeks for delivery of your first issue. For full terms and conditions, see: http://techmags.com.au/style/images/FutureTC.pdf Please see our privacy policy on page 3.

TWILIGHT

BLADES

How **CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33**, a western dark fantasy evolution of the turn-based JRPG, is bravely venturing into the unknown

By Robert Jones

As the hulking monstrosity lurches towards us, a stitched together abomination that looks like a huge, corrupted Edwardian-period children's toy, Expedition 33's youngest team member, Maelle, draws her rapier and issues a battle cry that seems to reach far beyond her attitude to embody her fighting style. Maelle's delivery of "Finesse and grace!" sounds like a ideological riposte to the grotesqueries of the broken world around her, as well as its Nevron denizens. It feels like a mantra Maelle is determined to live by in this apocalyptic, dying world to the very end, regardless of if she and her companions reach and best their adversary, the mysterious and calamitous Paintress. It also feels apt in describing what surely will be the most elegant and excitingly fresh new RPG of 2025.

CLAIR DE LUNE

Welcome to the dark fantasy world of Sandfall Interactive's *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*, a distinctly western evolution of the classic turn-based combat JRPG. Maelle and her fellow team members from Expedition 33 – a group tasked with venturing forth from their city of Lumière and finding and ending the being known as the Paintress, who each year returns to the city's central monolith and paints an ever decreasing number upon it, culling everyone of that age immediately – have ventured forth into the unknown and are now face to face with a hideous Nevron foe, who must be bested in combat.

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33's combat will immediately feel familiar to anyone who has played a *Persona* game, or a classic *Final Fantasy*. Your team of three characters (there are more than three potential team members, but that is the active party limit) take turns along with enemy NPCs to dish out and, potentially, receive punishment, with a variety of weapon, skill and power attacks, as well as items, selectable. The turn order at the top-left of the screen shows you who is up and who is on deck, while your team's health and action point (AP) totals can be viewed bottom-right. Enemy health

IT FEELS LIKE A MANTRA MAELLE IS DETERMINED TO LIVE BY TO THE END

bars are presented across the top of the screen. Weapon attacks by your team members don't cost AP, but their special skills do, so managing these and exploiting them to target enemy weaknesses is key.

So far so standard turn-based JRPG, but where *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* notably moves the genre forward, bravely venturing into unknown new territory, is in its introduction of real-time elements in both attack and defence, calling upon the player to time button presses to optimise attacks, as well as dodge or parry enemy blows. Indeed, the parrying system in *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* actually allows for the ability to, providing the gamer plays perfectly, successfully riposte all enemy attacks and, what's more, turn the tide on their foes with devastating counterattacks of their own. Timing windows for attacks are shown on-screen, with the relevant button to press shown with a clockwise-moving visual countdown quickly rotating around it. Press the button in the ideal timing window and you deal more damage. These timing windows for attacks appear fairly generous, which is not the case with dodge and parry. On defence, not only do you not have such an obvious visual indicator for when to button-press, with gamers having to rely on watching enemy attack patterns carefully, but timing windows are smaller and, in the case of parrying, noticeably so. However, if Expedition 33 team members Maelle, Gustave, Lune and Sciel can successfully parry a string of enemy attacks, then the

FAR LEFT: Maelle exploring the ruined, surreal landscape around the city of Lumière.

ABOVE: Combat is turn-based, with three team members operational in the party at any one time.

SWORDS AT SUNSET

Meet some of the key members of Expedition 33

GUSTAVE

A talented engineer, Gustave has spent his life up to this point defending the city of Lumière. Now, in the final year of his life, he has joined Expedition 33 to hunt down and defeat the Paintress.

LUNE

One of Lumière's foremost mages, Lune is responsible for charting the team's path on its journey. She is determined to unravel the mystery of the Paintress and the wider world.

MAELLE

A 16-year-old orphan who never felt Lumière was her home, Malle is by far the youngest of the team's members. She hungers for exploration and a chance to forge her own destiny.

SCIEL

A former farmer, Sciel is a cheerful and serene warrior who has come to terms with the painful reality of her likely death. The Expedition will either defeat her or it won't, and that will be that.

THE UNKNOWN

Pervading throughout the game is a feeling of venturing forth into the unknown. While Expedition 33 do have a final goal, in defeating the Paintress, they have no idea how to reach her, or what waits for them ouside of the city of Lumière. Uncertainty feels baked in.

UNREAL ENGINE 5

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 is being made in UE5, and that has brought with it next-gen graphics, with character lighting and animation particularly impressive. It feels a perfect partner for a game so invested in the ideas of light, dark and colour.

counterattack reward is huge, with the character or party pulling off a slick, visually impressive beatdown. These real-time elements feel fresh, holding engagement in the fight playing out on-screen, while also offering gamers an extra level of control over proceedings. On top of these timed button presses, the combat system also lets characters manually aim certain attacks, such as when team member Gustave whips out his pistol, to target

enemy weakpoints such as an arm joint, or exposed power source. Sandfall has mixed up the traditional turn-based JRPG combat formula to great effect here.

CINEMATIC AND SURREAL

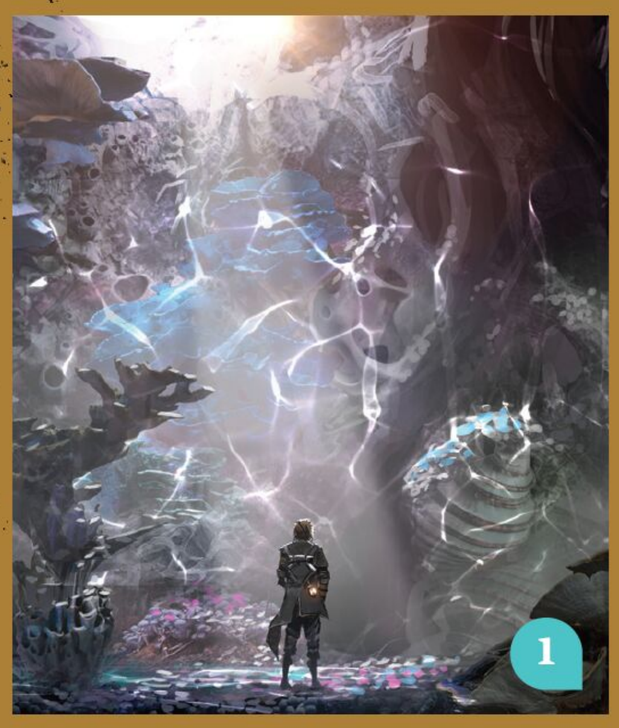
Where Sandfall also moves away from the traditional JRPG backbone its game is built around, is in its far more western art style and design, which is best described as steampunk Belle Époque, a heady mix of exquisite tailoring, and bronze-clad machinery and weapons, all of which is brought to life in fine, beautifully lit detail by the game's Unreal Engine 5 engine. As a JRPG, when you're not in turn-based combat you are progressing through a series of dark fantasy lands, taking control of a single lead character (you can choose who you play as) to explore, but there is a marked surrealist quality to these environments that feels exciting. For example, an early landscape sees players walking around on their feet despite appearing to be underwater. Look up, and huge waves can be seen, with a frozen, ruined ship breaking apart within them. Equally, look to the horizon, and huge landmasses float, seemingly suspended by invisible strings in the sky, while below ruined human structures and war machines are entwined with nature. Throw in Nevron enemies that look like something out of a nightmare and, no doubt about it,

APOCALYPSE
The world of *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* is, despite moments of surrealist beauty, very much apocalyptic in tone, with visuals communicating a breakdown in the structure of reality. The monolith, with its ever decreasing number, sits at the heart of this.

BELLE ÉPOQUE
The game's art style has been largely influenced by the Belle Époque period of France and central Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This is evident most in character outfits, which blend elements of period-accurate tailoring and technology.

FAR LEFT: Environments are often punctuated with huge objects or monuments, adding to the surreal feel.

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33


1

2

3

4

5

1 Environments in *Expedition 33* mix traditional dark fantasy visuals with surrealist elements.

2 How did this photo from my Paris 2024 holiday album end up here?!

3 Character designs are frequently unique and memorable.

4 Concept art showing enemy design variations. Many resemble corrupted Edwardian period toys.

5 Targeting enemy weakpoints is key to defeating larger foes efficiently.

there's a dream-like quality to *Expedition 33* that is not usually evident in JRPGs. There's a finesse and flair, too, to the depiction of the team members of the expedition, both in the game's slick in-game animation and its admittedly gorgeous cinematics. There's an acclaimed English-language cast lending their voices to bring the game's characters to life, including Jennifer English (Shadowheart in *Baldur's Gate III*), Ben Starr (Clive in *Final Fantasy XVI*), Andy Serkis (Gollum in The Lord of the Rings movies), Charlie Cox (Daredevil: Born Again), Kirsty Rider (Sandman) and Shala Nyx (The Old Guard), among others, and this quality along with Unreal Engine 5's MetaHuman Animator technology makes cutscenes an emotional, visually stunning treat. Character expressions feel believable and subtle, while even the smallest details of their face, or the imperfections of their battleworn skin and outfits, are lit naturally. It helps brings them to life, as well as the plight that Expedition 33 and the civilisation of Lumière are facing as their loved ones are taken from them by the Paintress each year.

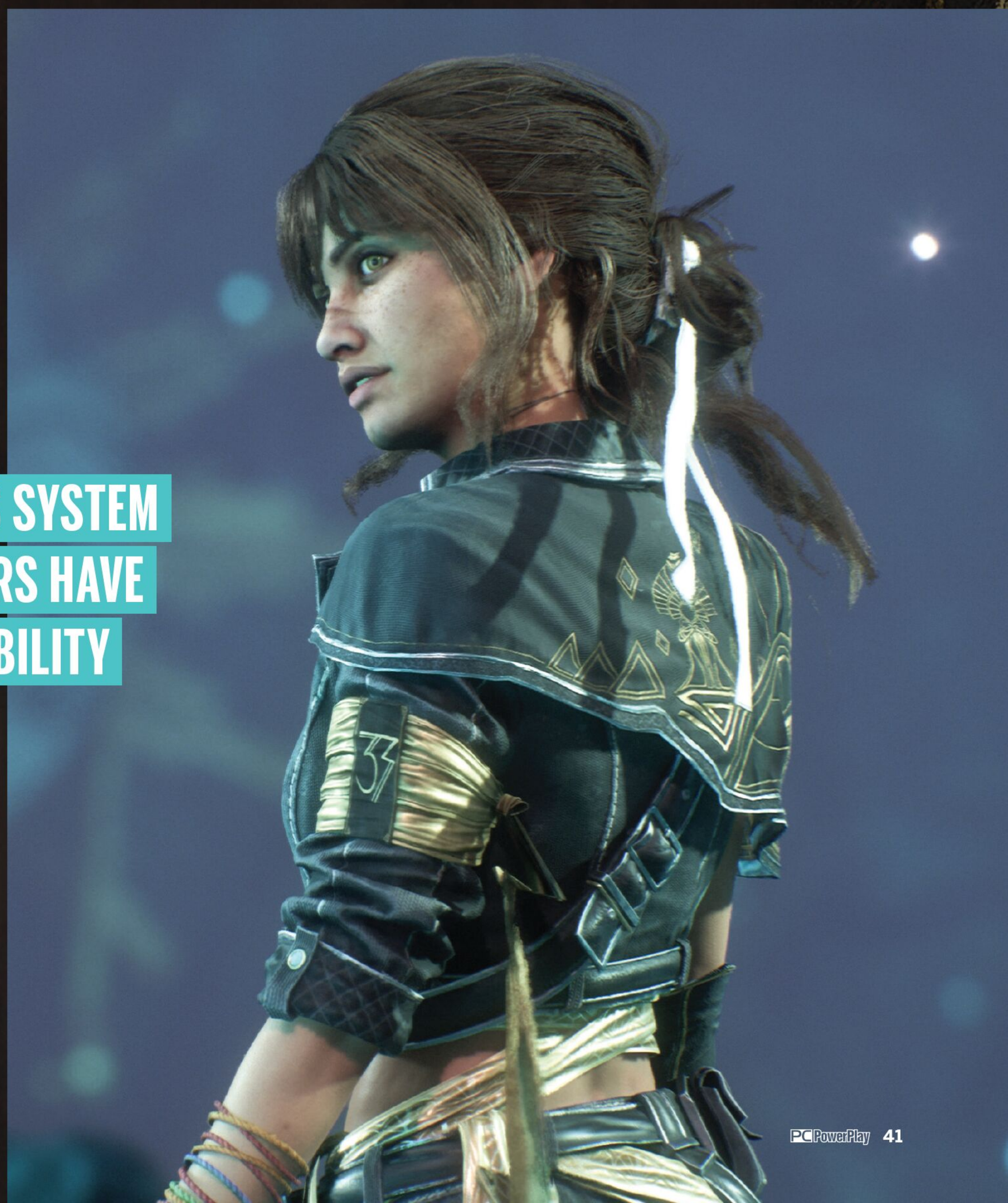
A WESTERN IDENTITY

Where Sandfall also moves away from a traditional, class-based JRPG is in its skills system. While specific characters in the Expedition 33 team do indeed lean towards a specific type of role and play, such as Lune the natural choice for a ranged magic user, the game's active skills system, supported by a secondary passive effects Picto system, means that characters have far more build flexibility than traditional JRPGs would offer, where succeeding in combat often means leaning into a character's specific expertise. By unlocking and combining passive Picto boons with skills from each player's deep tree of potential abilities, various combinations can be achieved, allowing characters to attack, defend or heal each other in surprising ways. Respeccing a character is also easy in the game, allowing for different builds to be created and switched between.

THE ACTIVE SKILLS SYSTEM MEANS CHARACTERS HAVE MORE BUILD FLEXIBILITY

This arguably more western take on the JRPG also extends to *Expedition 33*'s soundtrack, which blends more traditional JRPG beats with a distinctly French operatic and symphonic flavour, and one that feels like it supports the game's pervasively sombre, melancholic tone. There are songs sung in French, as well as a completely made-up language, the latter adding to the game's air of mystery about who the Paintress is and what is going on in the world. It all has the effect of building both the hype for *Expedition 33* and the sense of intrigue around its secrets.

There's still plenty we don't know about *Expedition 33*, such as the extent of its world and the gameplay opportunities that lie within it. But, somehow, that feels fine. If anything, it feels sympathetic to the experience both Expedition 33 and Sandfall Interactive, a development team creating its first ever game, are going through. Like them, we're stepping into the unknown. This is a new IP from a new studio trying to do something uniquely different with the JRPG template. Right now, though, it feels like it is going to succeed, and deliver one of the most exciting new games of 2025. ■



BELOW: Sciel has a light and playful side despite her tragic, melancholic past.

DEVELOPER DIARY

THE VANGUARD

Sandfall Interactive's devs on their own game

As huge RPG fans here at PC PowerPlay, right now we've got serious hype for *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*. However, despite getting to see a good slice of the game, many things remain unknown about this new IP, so we spoke directly with some of its key developers, including its creative director, Guillaume Broche and art director, Nicholas Maxson-Fancombe, to get some much-wanted answers.

Could you talk about the game's core concept of the monolith and the Paintress?

GB: We had this idea of, "OK, there's a monolith, and the age [painted on it] is going down, and people are disappearing, younger and younger." And then we said, "OK, how can we do an interesting story around this?" It's such a big, fascinating mystery, this concept, that we really wanted to dive deeper into: "OK, we don't understand anything. There's this massive thing. It's so in-your-face, and everybody sees it all the time. But everything around it is shrouded in mystery." And, yeah, you really have this sense of wonder in terms of what you discover in terms of art, in terms of the level, in terms of gameplay, and also in terms of story. So as you progress through the story, you also discover completely new stuff. You can expect a lot of twists and turns. We really tried to build the game so that you discover something new every time you reach a new zone, and every time you meet someone new.

What informed your world design?

NMF: Most of the artwork that I've done in the past is more in the steampunk and Victorian vibe that I already kind of liked. I like the mechanical feel of that universe. But going into this new game, I had to really think outside of the box of what we usually see in games. I really love *Dishonored* in terms of the geometrical designs and the Art Deco. I love the aesthetic behind that. I tried to implement a bit of that into our French Belle Époque. What do you generally see in Belle Époque? How would I actually try to think outside of that as well? But then I always liked the fact that there's a glitchy vibe within the world, so everything is kind of a bit screwed up. You know, the gravity of things that just float all over the place. I like to create stuff in which people just question: "What is that? What are we looking at?" I always like to make designs that just make people question it.

What's the deal with game's unique monstrous enemies, as they often look like huge corrupted kids' toys?

NMF: I think it comes from that sort of vibe that you said about children's toys. It's trying to get that *Little Nightmares*, creepy vibe towards it, and amplifying – I don't know – three times the scale of the normal size of a child, for example. It just makes it a bit

DEV PROFILE

Guillaume Broche

CEO & creative director

Having previously worked at Ubisoft Shanghai, Broche founded Sandfall in 2020 and began making *Clair Obscur*.

Nicholas Maxson-Francombe

Art director

Well known for his steampunk-style paintings, Nicholas is an expert illustrator and graphic designer.

creepy for the game. But, yeah, it just comes down to... I come up with very different silhouettes for designs, and try to see which one is the most kind of out-there. Which one is the most unique from other creatures that I've already seen? It's just a real mix and match of stuff that exists to something a bit more unique.

The game's cinematics look superb. What was your creation process?

GB: First, everything we do is in-house. All the motion-capture for the animation – we worked with a really talented team of actors for eight months, for like three to four days per month, to do all the cinematics. When we did them, we really focused on getting them done perfectly. The mocap actors were literally crying in the scenes when their characters were crying. It was real acting. We have a complex narrative, and I think we have pretty complex characters. It was really important for us to translate that to the screen. We had to do everything in-house, with sensor suits, and we are using the latest MetaHuman Animator technology for the facial animation.

Why have you leant into a more linear structure with *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*?

GB: We are not a completely linear game. We still have some reveals to do. We have a lot of side content and stuff to do. Like, the story itself is linear, but the construction of the world, the level design, and where you can go and when – it's not strictly linear. So I wouldn't describe it as this. But if we wanted to talk about the narrative, I really wanted to tell a story. It was really important. The script is what drove the game. It was like, "OK, we need this, because the script says this, and the script says that, so the characters need to do this." The best way for me to tell this kind of story is to be linear and kind of old-school. There was never any debate or anything. We just wanted to tell a story, and tell it in this way. It made sense like this. But in terms of gameplay and level design, it's not really linear.

YOU REALLY HAVE THIS SENSE OF WONDER IN TERMS OF WHAT YOU DISCOVER

Finally, can you explain your use of the phrase 'Clair Obscur'?

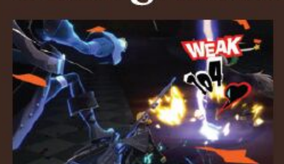
GB: It's a name that we love because it encompasses everything that we really love about our project, and every single aspect, like the art style. We love contrast – me and Nicholas. We love to go between light and dark. I think it also draws a lot on the lighting and art direction of the game. It's also how we see our own philosophy at the studio. We make something serious, but we like to not take ourselves too seriously. ■

FAR LEFT: The combat menu will be immediately familiar to JRPG fans, evoking *Persona* and *Final Fantasy* games.

ABOVE: Gustave feels like the lead character in *Expedition 33*, but you can control any of them while exploring.

QUEUE THESE UP

Other great RPGs with turn-based combat



PERSONA 5

Not only, in its *Royal* incarnation, the best *Persona* game Atlus has ever made, but also one of the best JRPGs ever made too. The combat system starts out simple, but blossoms into deep complexity.

FINAL FANTASY X

This game, along with sequel *X-2*, delivers classic turn-based *Final Fantasy* combat, along with one of the series' most loved settings and characters. Strong HD remasters are available today on PC.

SEA OF STARS

A love-letter to the classic '90s JRPG *Chrono Trigger*, this game delivers rich visuals and engaging combat. The bright, colourful 2D graphics are a joy to behold, too. A top choice for PC handheld play.

BALDUR'S GATE III

Well, we've got to mention it, haven't we? The fantasy RPG of the decade that won every award going has a deep and rich D&D-inspired turn-based combat system that is a joy to use and exploit.

SAVE THE DATE

australian

hi-fi

Show **SYDNEY 2025**

4-6 APRIL 2025

AT THE SYDNEY CENTRAL HOTEL

MANAGED BY ASCOTT

BROUGHT TO YOU BY WHAT HI-FI? australian hi-fi SOUND IMAGE

BEST ONGOING GAME

CREATIVE ACHIEVEMENT

BEST SURVIVAL

BEST TACTICS

BEST ROGUELIKE

BEST COMEDY

BEST FPS

BEST CITY BUILDER

BEST SANDBOX

BEST RPG

BEST EXPANSION

BEST MULTIPLAYER

GAME OF THE YEAR

GAME *of the* YEAR

PC PowerPlay AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG SINCE 1996

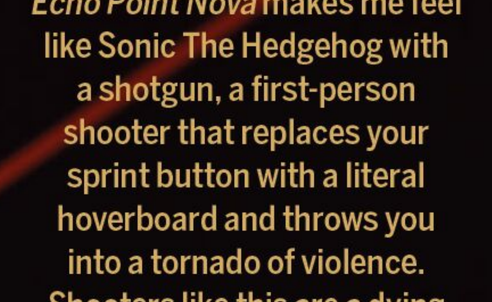
Celebrating the absolute best of the last 12 months of PC gaming

PERSONAL PICK

The Rise of the Golden Idol

CHRISTOPHER LIVINGSTON

Examine 20 bizarre crime scenes and painstakingly piece together a narrative of who's who, who did what, and most importantly: why. The individual mysteries are satisfying to solve and the way they all tie into a larger story about the misdeeds inspired by the Golden Idol makes me feel like I'm investigating a genuine conspiracy.



PERSONAL PICK

Echo Point Nova

JAKE TUCKER

Echo Point Nova makes me feel like Sonic The Hedgehog with a shotgun, a first-person shooter that replaces your sprint button with a literal hoverboard and throws you into a tornado of violence. Shooters like this are a dying breed, a hyperkinetic celebration of ultraviolence where it's all about moving fast and looking cool doing it. It's been a good year for shooters, but this one is truly unique.

BEST ONGOING GAME 2024

STARDEW VALLEY

Kara Phillips: At this point, *Stardew Valley* feels like the gift that keeps on giving. When you first play it feels like you've got a whole world at your fingertips – everything feels so new and exciting. But the best part of *Stardew* is no matter how long you've been playing, this feeling doesn't go away. Even when you've decided to speedrun to Ginger Island, restore the community centre in your first year, and fill the library with everything you find.

With a lot of farming simulators, it's pretty easy to get bored of completing the same tasks every single day – cultivating your crops and tending to your animals – but so much time has been put into making Pelican Town lively enough that even winter is an exciting season. It's basically impossible to get bored.

We've been treated this year to the biggest content update the game has ever received, too, so even for someone like me who has been playing for the better part of six years now it feels like I've just picked it up for the first time. Which is very impressive for a game that initially revolves around such a simple day-to-day routine. Plus, there's now a family of raccoons to help out and that's an instant win in my books.

THERE'S NOW A FAMILY OF RACCOONS TO HELP OUT

Elie Gould: *Stardew Valley 1.6* was one of the most exciting releases this year, not just because it added a whole new farm and festivals but because it managed to reignite my love for this little life sim.

I had previously stormed my way through *Stardew Valley*'s story, maxing out my farm and ticking off every single achievement that came my way. But it wasn't until I was forced to slow down with a new player by my side in a co-op farm that I realised that the best part of this game is that you don't really have to do anything at all.

You get out of *Stardew Valley* what you put into it. It's just as acceptable to slowly work on your farm – fishing on days when you don't want to pick up a watering can or planning out your next home extension – than it is to go feral in the mines, digging your way down to level 120.

I've now taken to appreciating the slower things in life, like tending to our two chickens, Cheese and Onion, as well as just tidying up the garden when and where I see fit. Doing pretty much the same thing every day may not sound very interesting, but it's remarkable how soothing that is. You can be your genuine self here, no matter what form that may take or how many times it may change, and I can't believe it took me this long to figure that out.

CREATIVE ACHIEVEMENT 2024

UFO 50

Evan Lahti: Imagine the feeling of stumbling upon, perhaps while excavating some beige office tomb that has laid untouched since the ’90s, a sealed box of 50 never-released retro games. This is the jackpot feeling *UFO 50* delivers, rediscovering the pleasant imperfections of games from another era at whatever pace you’d like.

UFO 50 is a passion project created in Gamemaker by Derek Yu, Paul Hubans, Eirik Suhrke, Ojiro Fumoto, Jon Perry and Tyriq Plummer, an indie dream team, and a piece of its joy comes from discovering the varied tastes of these creators.

What makes the collection a singular creative achievement is the way it lovingly reproduces the charming flaws and timeless merits of games from the ’80s and early ’90s. When I had trouble beating *Overbold*, a roguelike shooter, I popped into the cowboy JRPG. After dying to a boss there, I tried the *Pac-Man*-and-*Splatoon*-with-cars game, and then *Golfaria*, which must be the world’s first adventure game where you play as a golf ball. There’s an underworld caterpillar race betting simulator, a brutal speed-platformer from the creator of *Downwell*, and to come down from it, a serene one that takes place in a walrus’ daydream. These goofy premises belie how cohesive and shockingly deep the games are. Some of them could’ve gone for a few dollars each on Steam, disproportionate value given *UFO 50*’s modest $36 price.

Shaun Prescott: *UFO 50*’s most unlikely success is its storytelling. Played consecutively, these 50 games provide a fictionalised account of one of the most critical periods in the medium’s history, taking in the emergence of franchises, sequels, threequels and mascots, all with the charming tentativeness of pioneering efforts. That’s not even to mention the story of UFO Soft itself, told in dribs and drabs through game descriptions and the distinct design sensibilities of its fictional crew. For those invested in this surprisingly strange tale, there’s a literal hidden layer to *UFO 50* that will amply reward your curiosity.

BEST SURVIVAL 2024

PACIFIC DRIVE

Jacob Ridley: Do you ever get that cosy feeling when driving down a road at night? A light rain spattering against the windscreen as your wipers move to and fro with a gentle squeak. That’s the feeling *Pacific Drive* captures. Except there are weird junkyard alien-type-things and mystery mannequins.

You might find yourself improving your weaponry or armour in many survival games. Not this one. The only thing you’re fending off are rust, failing electronics, and years of neglect on a station wagon. A station wagon that is your only companion in the Pacific Northwest and seemingly the thing trying to kill you most of all. A series of increasingly frustrating car-based gaffes mean you’re never short of a need to venture into the wilderness looking for materials. For me, that means grabbing a controller, setting my gaming chair to relaxed mode, and dimming the lights. This game’s simple controls and gradual pacing make it a great way to take it easy after a long day – a welcome change from some more intense survival mechanics.

Elie Gould: I love liminal spaces. The creepy quiet before the storm, an unearthly vibe, and the unsettling feeling that something is waiting for you around every corner are just unmatched. So it should come as no surprise that driving through the pine forests of the Olympic Exclusion Zone was exactly the kind of existential torment that I love to experience in a videogame.

Driving around abandoned villages, down dirt roads, or along vast stretches of tarmac in search of doodads and doohickeys was astonishingly good fun. Tethering yourself to the car is a cool new twist on survival mechanics, and one that I was happy to explore. The car upgrades and customisation were also intuitive and surprising, so much so that it actually made me appreciate cars more.

But *Pacific Drive*’s stand-out feature to me was its incredible radio. The tracklist that A Shell in the Pit’s producer put together was astoundingly good, and if you haven’t listened to the lead song, Ghost on the Road, yet, then I implore you to do so as soon as possible.

BEST TACTICS 2024

TACTICAL BREACH WIZARDS

Harvey Randall: I had the pleasure of reviewing *Tactical Breach Wizards* when it came out this year, and it really is a prime example of a game that defines exactly what it's here to do, what vibe it's here to capture, and then proceeds to get full marks on every one of its own set goals. When the only problem a game gives me is that I wish there was more of it, I can confidently say it's a banger.

As for the why, well, *Tactical Breach Wizards*' mechanics are just plain magic – each character has their own specific niche that manages to interact strategically with their fellow spec-ops spellcasters in inventive ways. That'd be enough to make it a solid 17-20 hours of fun, but its story is way better than it's got any right to be, tucked as it is into a limited handful of cutscenes. It's just downright excellent. There's this belief that you can't have funny, banter-flooded dialogue without dipping into the dreaded 'Marvel syndrome' – where everything is irreverent and sincere moments aren't allowed to breathe without an improvised mug to the camera. This game proves that problem a mere skill issue: one moment I was laughing my butt off at Jen Kellen bickering with her own dream clone, the next I was genuinely getting misty-eyed as Sabin went into the specifics of how her faith treats the departed.

Overall – if the idea of a romp where a Navy Seer SEAL kicks down a door with a staff-gun sounds like a good time, you'll have a great one.

Fraser Brown: As the resident tactical sicko, I assumed that *Tactical Breach Wizards*' violent, puzzle-like conundrums would be the highlight here, and to be clear: they are. But honestly *TBW* could have been half as good as a tactics game and I would still have been enchanted.

That's down to the big laughs. The MCU has made me deeply suspicious of superpowered weirdos engaging in quips and bants. But *TBW*'s dialogue, even in just the first hour, elicited so many guffaws. But these characters aren't mere vehicles for jokes, cardboard cutouts who exist solely for giggles – their pasts, neuroses and relationships build them into something so much richer. Even if, primarily, they are a very funny bunch. It's the delicious cherry on top of what is a tight, clever tactical romp.

ITS STORY IS WAY BETTER THAN IT'S GOT ANY RIGHT TO BE

Phil Savage: *TBW* was created by Tom Francis, who worked on PC Gamer mag for around a decade, leaving in 2013 after the release of his first game, *Gunpoint*. To avoid conflicts of interest, those of us who worked with Tom at the time – myself included – were not part of the decision to include it in this year's awards. All of its nominations came from writers who do not have a personal relationship with Tom.

BEST ROGUELIKE 2024

CAVES OF QUD

Lincoln Carpenter: There is too much to say about *Caves of Qud*, but it never quite feels like I've said enough. It's a roguelike's roguelike: A science-fantasy wasteland populated by a rich gnarl of combat systems and procedural world-state simulations that have no qualms about leveraging their brutality against you. *Qud* has an absurd breadth of possibility to offer: I've started games as two-hearted barbarians and ended them as winged, railgun-toting scorpion-men. I've entered *Qud* as a cyborg gunslinger, and within a few levels and chance augmentation procedures in Becoming Nooks I no longer needed my pistols, because I was throwing force knives that I could 3D print with my mind. I've started as many new playthroughs just to try a new idea for a centaur rifleman or steel-plated pugilist as I have because my last character met a grisly end after getting their head erupted by a psychic duelist.

As exciting as my newest character build might be, it's *Qud*'s setting that makes that next playthrough so appealing. *Qud*'s history is unknowably long, and each run generates its own inscrutable variation on those countless centuries of crumbling civilisations and shambling, paradimensional horrors. Those histories are gradually excavated as you explore; by inspecting statues, paintings and inscriptions, you'll learn about sultans assassinated with knives made of sand, prophesied children born with mouths full of circuitry, villages founded by robot cults.

Qud's real treasure is its writing. Its NPCs have their own dialects, tics and idioms reflecting their own histories in *Qud*'s surreal world. Every item and creature, meanwhile, has a unique description in gorgeously arcane, purposefully excessive prose. Mutants are "vessels of the metamorphic numen"; old statues are "erosion-smoothed abstractions". In *Qud*, a chair isn't a chair. It's a "wharf for the ass".

GORGEOUSLY ARCANE, PURPOSEFULLY EXCESSIVE PROSE

Sure, it's self-indulgent, but those excesses are deliberate. It's a game seeking to feel like an artefact impossibly out of time, and it succeeds. Once you've made it past your introductory dozen-or-so deaths, playing *Caves of Qud* feels like reading a history book written on the other side of an unfathomably distant future, in a language you only understand just well enough to be enthralled.

Wes Fenlon: The world is richer for having *Qud* in it. As with *Dwarf Fortress*, you can benefit from afar: the stories its players tell about sentient furniture and unplanned limb growth are their own small treasures.

PERSONAL PICK

Silent Hill 2

JODY MACGREGOR

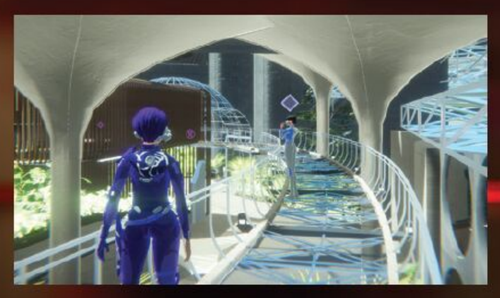
Bloober Team added little to *Silent Hill 2*'s excellent story. Instead, it expanded everything else. The mannequins, once an annoyance you'd run past, became sneaky jerks who hide under furniture. They startled me more than once, but just as surprising was how impactful familiar story beats can be, slightly rearranged. It's more remix than remake, preserving what made the original great.

PERSONAL PICK

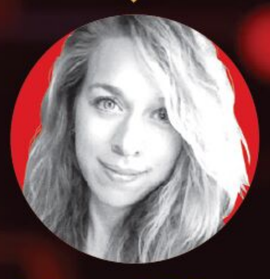
1000xResist

JESS KINGHORN

The Past: alien visitors known as Occupants come to Earth and bring a deadly water-purging disease to humanity. The Future: teenaged Iris is the sole survivor of the pandemic, now reigning as 'Allmother' over a society of her own clones. The Present: the Allmother lies dead, killed by one of her most loyal subjects. And that's not a spoiler, but the opening to one of the best sci-fi stories I've experienced.



PERSONAL PICK



Fields of Mistria

LAUREN MORTON

This year's best farm/life sim may still be in Early Access but it's excellent already. *Fields of Mistria* is a fever dream of *Harvest Moon* and *Sailor Moon* inspirations with a Game Boy Advance aesthetic and lovable townies. *Mistra*'s real win is the fun and believable dialogue for all its characters that really sells them as a town of interconnected people. Don't miss Friday night Dragons and Drama at the bar.

PERSONAL PICK

Hades 2

HARVEY RANDALL

In a year stacked with some meaty releases, it's easy for me to forget that *Hades 2* hoovered up 34 hours of my free time, then gave me enough of a hankering that I went back and destroyed *Hades 1*, as well. It's shaping up to be just as much of a banger as the first game, and it was also my personal pick in our Top 100 list, I just like it that much.

BEST COMEDY 2024

THANK GOODNESS YOU'RE HERE!

Kara Phillips: A lot of the time, when I say a game makes me laugh, what I really mean is I exhaled through my nose at some point in a half-hearted way that barely equates to any sort of laughter. But *Thank Goodness You're Here!* actually had me open-mouth cackling through the vast majority of it. Between its ridiculous character design and its quickfire slapstick dialogue, I can't stop trying to convince everyone around me to play it.

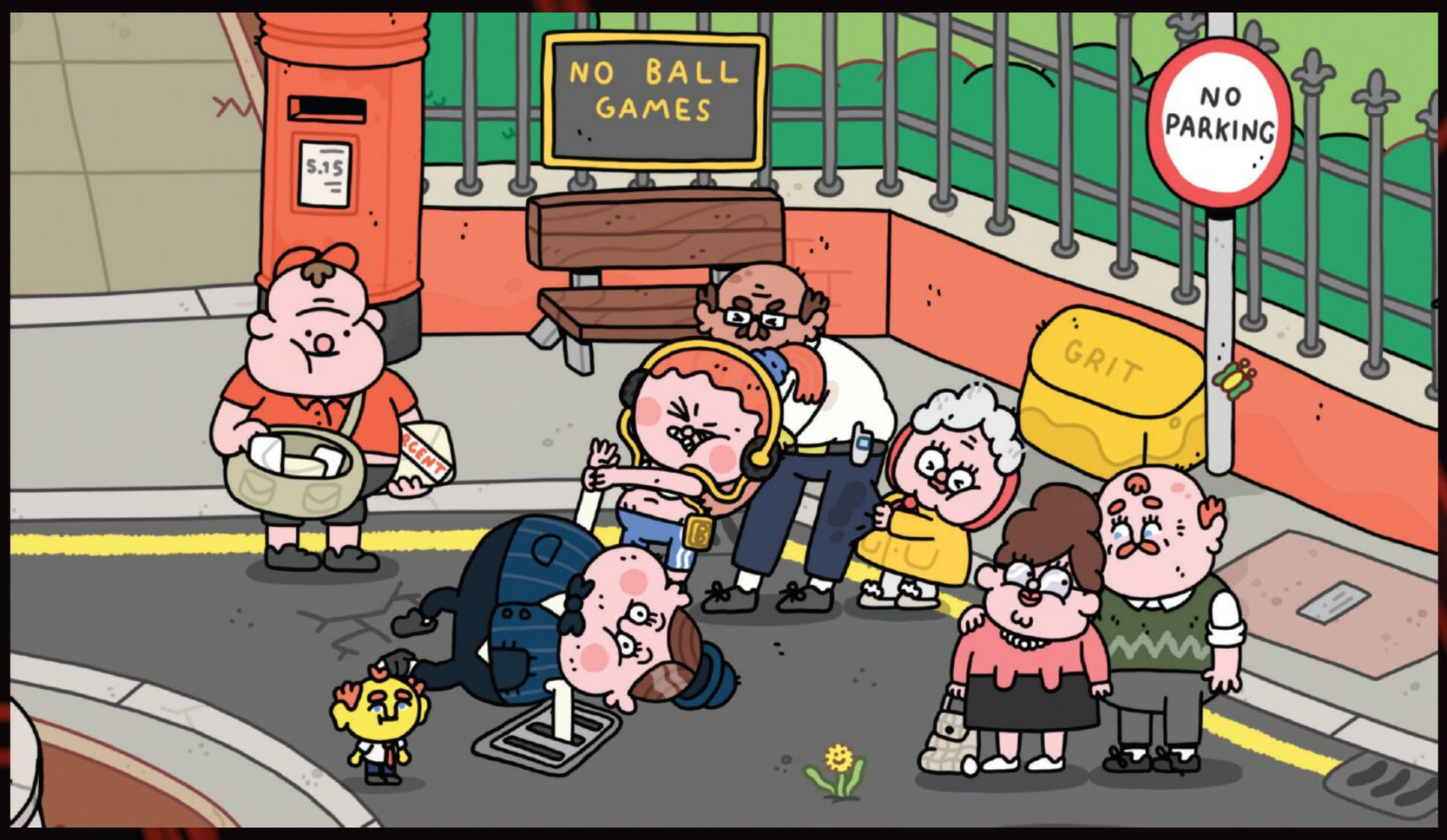
It's not a challenging game – most of the jobs you'll complete are minigames that involve simple puzzle-solving or very easy platforming. But that plays to its favour, giving you more time to admire the world and characters that Coal Supper has created. Never in my life have I played a game featuring characters that both repulse and entertain me, at least not to this extent. If you've ever had any interest in Don't Hug Me I'm Scared, then you'll understand the morbid sketch show vibe. Plus, it's hard not to love anything that Matt Berry plays a part in, and his character in *Thank Goodness You're Here!* does not disappoint.

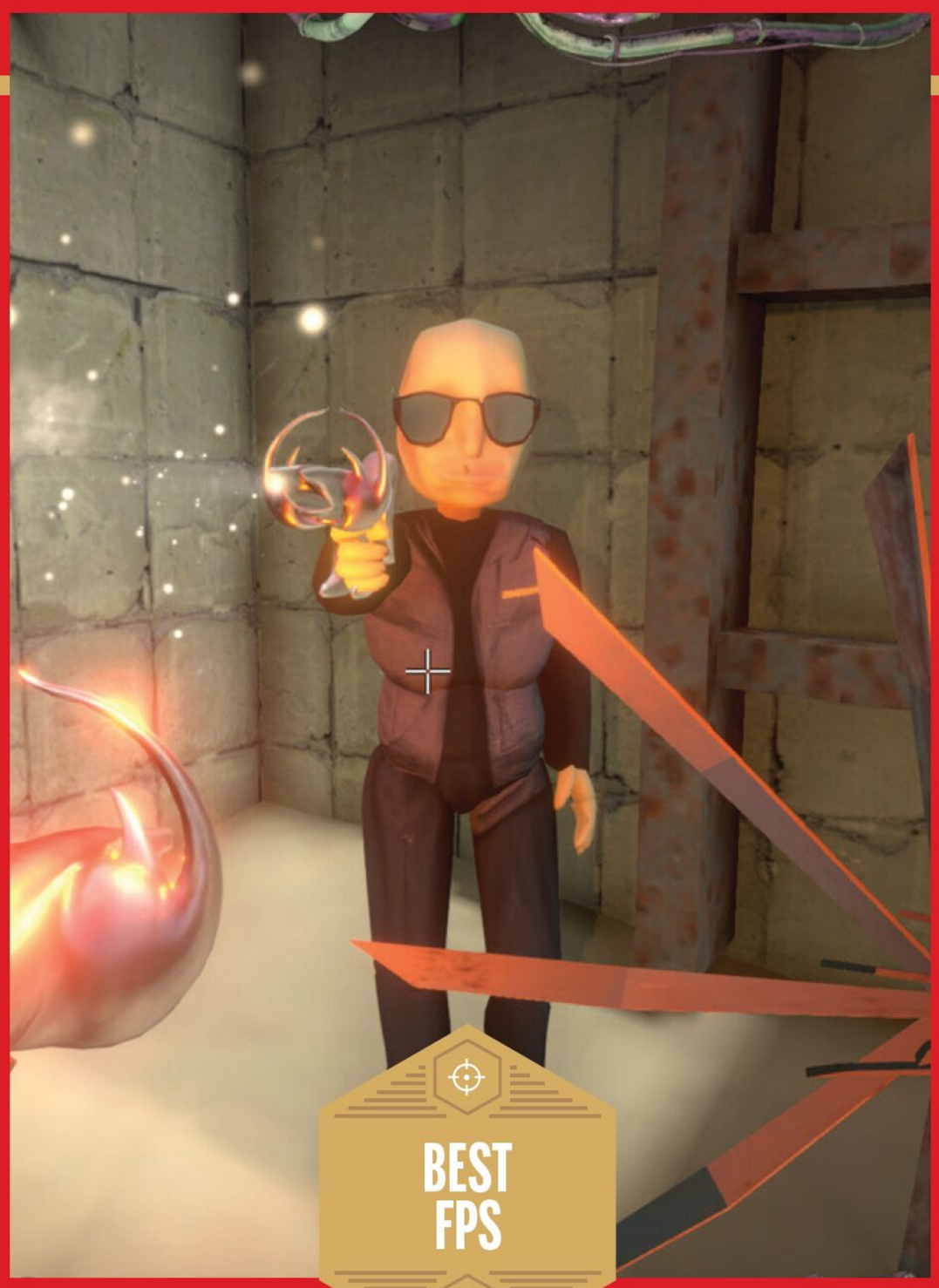
If you want to point and laugh at Britain, this ridiculous game gives you the best opportunity to do so. It's like all the best bits of my favourite British comedy shows mashed together into something I feel the need to force upon everyone who even glances its way. If I had my way, *Thank Goodness You're Here!* would be everyone's game of the year.

CHARACTERS THAT BOTH REPULSE AND ENTERTAIN ME

Jacob Ridley: There's one string of bin jokes in *Thank Goodness You're Here!* that had me wheezing. It's not only a game with impeccable comedic timing, but one able to play on good-natured joshing about the Great British public. A book of colloquialisms might be needed to translate for those further afield than dear ol' Albion, and subtitles come in handy even if you are from round 'ere. But there's enough absurdity to keep anyone hooked – it's filled with surreal and slapstick caricatures.

Fraser Brown: Oh god, yeah, the bin gags left me in tears. One of several running jokes that made repeating your loop around the town so rewarding. What makes the whole endeavour even more impressive, though, is the fact that it was translated into so many different languages, despite how colloquial it is. That and how delightful it makes playfully slapping every single person in this Yorkshire town.





BEST FPS 2024

STRAFTAT

Jake Tucker: *STRAFTAT* makes me feel old. Not like the way my knees crunch as I get out of bed each morning or the way I don't understand TikTok, but in the way *STRAFTAT* channels the FPS games that I used to waste hours in as a teenager.

The 1v1 battles sound hypercompetitive: the 'two players enter, one player leaves' styling at the heart of *STRAFTAT* may evoke the Thunderdome, but there's an inherent ridiculousness because of the collection of random levels that lays things out like *Mario Party* for murderers. In one you'll fight in a maze of corridors with assault rifles, in another you're sliding down an icy slope hurling landmines at each other, or fighting each other with repulsor guns and knives as you try to knock your opponent to their doom.

STRAFTAT's biggest strength is that no matter how silly it looks the guns feel great, the janky art style always lands, and the level design is on point. Each round will take seconds to play out and it's intensely competitive, serious stuff. This is the core of things and it holds *STRAFTAT* together because no matter how silly the maps get or how ridiculous the weapons are, it's clear devs the Lemaitre Bros have a deep understanding of how they want these 1v1 matches to play out, and they haven't compromised on that vision.

So, I guess it actually is a Thunderdome. But the participants are going at it with nothing but rubber knives and a yo-yo.

Morgan Park: It really is something special. Like a modern LAN party in a can, *STRAFTAT* is a fundamentally social first-person shooter with the sort of quick-session magnetism that makes folks want to huddle around a Discord stream.

I can't say enough about those 70+ maps: a deep pool of battlegrounds both regular and extremely weird, like the one where the only gun pickup is at the end of an obstacle course, or the one that's just the Red Room from Twin Peaks. *STRAFTAT* is that bookmarked *Team Fortress 2/Unreal Tournament* server with all the good maps. And somehow it's actually free.

BEST CITY BUILDER 2024

MANOR LORDS

Elie Gould: *Manor Lords* came out at just the right time for me. Before landing on this medieval city builder/management game, I played quite a few horror games and Metroidvanias, which can honestly be pretty tiring. So it was refreshing to be tested by a game in a different way. Instead of needing to perfect reaction times, I had to do mental gymnastics to figure out whether this was really the right place to start an arable farm or solve trade issues by flooding the market with sheep. I'm not saying that I mastered this city builder, but I sure had a lot of fun growing my quaint town into a serious political and economic centre.

Andy Edser: *Manor Lords* is the sort of strategy-based city builder that I'd probably mess around with if it was a 2D, top-down, low budget offering, before eventually leaving for more graphically-temperate climes. But lo and indeed behold, it's actually one of the better-looking games I've played this year.

I hate to sound shallow, but I am, so that's just the way it comes out. At its core though, *Manor Lords* is a vibe game – a slice of middle-ages muckery that's acted like a goblet of not-so-refreshing mead to swish away the spicier notes of my usual grand strategy adventures to create something altogether more grounded.

I expected it to crunch and jank with the best of them, a result of its mostly-single-dev production – but instead it's been a smooth ride. The interface might be filled with a dizzying array of options, but it never feels overwhelming. That's a trick that other city builders would do well to imitate, and lends itself perfectly to chilled-out after-work sessions. Sometimes I don't need to save the world after a long day typing words about tech. Sometimes I just need to ponder history.

I could listen to my villagers mosey around my catastrophically planned town for hours, the gentle tingle of lutes drifting me into a place of mindful peace. Until it all kicks off, of course, and the swearing begins. *Manor Lords* is a mud bath to soothe the gaming soul, and my year has been all the better for it.

BEST SANDBOX
2024

SATISFACTORY

Wes Fenlon: *Satisfactory* is a different game for me depending on the week. Recently I found myself in the thick of the jungle on the far side of the map from the friendly green plains I'd first started building in; I had to go a long way to find iron deposits rich enough to let me build a towering, multi-floor factory dedicated to modular frames. They're just boring metal cubes, but for a week I obsessively arranged a perfectly balanced system of inputs and outputs for each individual component – the iron rods, the iron plates, the steel pipes – until the sum total of all that effort amounted to 21 frames per minute and a glass penthouse overlooking a waterfall at the edge of the world.

Did I need to build a skyscraper? Was it the most efficient use of my time to thread power towers across multiple biomes so I could zipline my way to the outer reaches? I stopped asking myself those kinds of questions hundreds of hours ago, long before *Satisfactory* left Early Access this year. This game is ostensibly about efficiency and optimisation, but the real joy comes when you stop building to complete the objectives and start creating for the sake of it. Making parts is the point, but it also barely matters at all. I've since moved on from my frame factory to crisscrossing the map with train lines. It'll keep me busy for a few months.

Satisfactory has the same endlessness as *Minecraft*, only trading the RPG-esque mechanics for the compulsive satisfaction of arranging conveyor belts at perfect 90-degree angles and building realistic supporting struts for factories that the game would let me leave floating in the air if I chose to thumb my nose at gravity. There was a potential Early Access path that leaned more into survival meters or more specific objectives and endless missions to complete, but those things aren't remotely as compelling as the expressiveness *Satisfactory 1.0* embraced instead. The final game is rife with paints and lighting and girders and windows and angled roofs and walls that combine into monolithic masterpieces in YouTube videos that first smack of the impossible, and then drive me to want to be even more creative myself. It's one of the best videogame spaces you can exist in this year, and may be my game of the decade.

LETTING ME JUMP AND ZIPLINE AROUND THE PLANET

Jake Tucker: At first all I cared about in *Satisfactory* was how to make my production lines as efficient as possible. After a hundred hours, I decided that was silly and all I really wanted to do was convert the planet into my own playground, letting me jump and zipline around the planet with aplomb. Maybe capitalism is good?

BEST RPG 2024

METAPHOR: REFANTAZIO

Mollie Taylor: As I've grown older and found myself with less free time, I've largely fallen off the JPRG train. But *Metaphor: ReFantazio* has pulled me right back in and reminded me why I adore this genre so much.

The game feels like an adult *Persona* – swapping out high school for high fantasy – crafting a gripping story and beloved characters that I came to deeply care for. I've fallen in love with Scouse dogs Fidelio and Basilio, while Hulkenberg's relatable love for food provides much-needed respite between the intense battles for the throne.

The Archetype system is also genuinely fantastic, reminiscent of the old-school *Final Fantasy* job systems. It creates far more freedom than I ever felt I had with my *Persona* teammates, and I had a ball creating different team synergies and cross-classing skills before big battles.

I HAD A BALL CREATING DIFFERENT TEAM SYNERGIES

Metaphor: ReFantazio may not have had the biggest budget or scope, but it has so much heart and style. I still can't stop thinking about it 150 hours and two playthroughs later.

Fraser Brown: *Metaphor* is the best game I've played all year. Though not strictly speaking part of the *Persona* series, it's also the best *Persona* game. I don't care about high school drama – I've done that already – but a civil war that's also a structured competition run by a corrupt theocracy, and which may end with a young lad and his pals (which include a talking bat) – ending a kingdom's institutional racism? Yeah, that's pretty novel.

Joshua Wolens: For years, Atlus has had one dream: to tell a story with political themes that doesn't fall flat on its face. *Persona 4* whiffed it hard. *Persona 5* came closer, but still wobbled. But here, with *Metaphor*, and with its story of a small heterochromatic boy and his fairy pal on a quest to end apartheid and wake up his boyfriend (or something, I haven't finished it yet), the studio might actually have pulled it off.

Harvey Randall: *Metaphor: ReFantazio* is my first ever Atlus game, and I picked a hell of a time to jump on, because it might be one of its best. As Joshua outlines above, the game's story is downright excellent, consistently endearing, well-written, and bursting with a manic kind of creativity that's typical for the studio, just with swords and sorcery instead of high school and mind heists.

Phil Savage: Fair warning, the soundtrack goes hard – its eerie Gregorian-esque chanting will worm its way into your head.

PERSONAL PICK

Shin Megami Tensei 5: Vengeance

SHAUN PRESCOTT

Imagine *Persona 5*, except its brilliant 'Press Turn' turn-based combat system doesn't have to share the stage with all the social sim and visual novel aspects. *Shin Megami Tensei* has always been the sterner older sibling of *Persona*, but *Vengeance* feels like an earnest attempt on Atlus' part to polish it for a wider audience.

PERSONAL PICK

Diablo IV: Vessel of Hatred

TIM CLARK

Riding the live service rollercoaster with *Destiny* prepared me for *Diablo IV*'s issues, but I'm impressed at how aggressively Blizzard has shored up the many elements of its ARPG players were unhappy with. As a result *Vessel of Hatred* felt almost like a victory lap, thanks to the brilliance of its flashy new Spiritborn class. Of course, it created new balance problems.

GAME of the YEAR

BEST EXPANSION 2024

ELDEN RING: SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE

Tyler Colp: My favourite expansions don't just answer questions or continue the plot from the original game, they stretch your imagination for what is even possible within it. *Shadow of the Erdtree* completes *Elden Ring* like it was always supposed to be there, adding surprising new weapon types, gorgeous new areas, and brutal new enemies.

The entire thing is built like the original *Dark Souls*; it's not exactly a corkscrew world, but it certainly feels like it as you drop down into dungeons and resurface in a place you caught glimpses of 20 hours before. The Land of Shadow is dense with secrets and structures that slowly unravel one final, masterful story in FromSoftware's tremendous action RPG.

Fraser Brown: *Shadow of the Erdtree* lets you murder gods with your stinky feet. It's very good for that alone.

Wes Fenlon: The only thing more tired than gushing about *Dark Souls*' influence on action games is talking about how great Metroidvania level design can be, but *Shadow of the Erdtree*'s map is so good I can't help but be doubly insufferable for a minute. *Shadow of the Erdtree* makes a sumptuous meal out of the old 'see that mountain? You can go there' cliché by making you work for it, dangling enticing destinations in front of you and making the path to each one a navigation puzzle of some kind. Jumping, hidden paths, huge shifts in elevation, open areas that flow gracefully into denser dungeons... this expansion was an anecdote to my open world fatigue, and I hope years from now we can point to it as an inflection point for open-world games doing way more with their environments than just making them big spaces to gallop across.

Harvey Randall: I beat Radahn, Promised Consort (Radahn was harder pre-patch) after hours of trying (he's easier now). Obviously, everyone else struggled (it was way harder before), likely including you, dear reader (I beat him on release, it was harder).

Shadow of the Erdtree is excellent – like a window into what *Elden Ring* could've been with a tighter, closer-knit world. New records for blood pressure aside, I had a blast.

BEST MULTIPLAYER 2024

HELLDIVERS 2

Morgan Park: When *Helldivers 2* comes up in conversation years from now, people will probably bring up its genius approach to live service gaming. Arrowhead had me glued to the edge of my seat for the early months of 2024, signing into the game almost daily to find a new piece of gear, unexplained winged beast, or cheeky communication from a fictional Super Earth. Arrowhead turned millions of casual shooter fans into roleplayers drafted in a galactic war, but after its narrative eventually slowed to a crawl and updates got rarer, I'm still playing *Helldivers 2* because it's just that good.

Its fundamentals are sturdy and unexpectedly sophisticated – guns pack a punch that you see in every severed bug leg or shredded Automaton chestplate – and its ballistic model has more in common with milsims than traditional shooters. There's a grace to *Helldivers 2* as the action oscillates between hardcore and slapstick, embracing random carnage and comedic ragdolls while allowing for skilful cooperation. I played it for 163 hours this year and can easily see that doubling when the Illuminate faction arrives. *Helldivers 2* was a big game when it launched, and it's only getting bigger. It's simply the best, most inventive co-op shooter we've seen since *Left4Dead*.

Evan Lahti: *Helldivers 2* is one of the rarest things in gaming: a messy blockbuster from a quirky Swedish developer that had eight years of support from one of the biggest publishers in the world to make it – and without much interference.

Harvey Randall: *Helldivers 2* has had a wobbly journey since its launch – but it's fought damn hard to keep its rightfully earned place. The only reason I'm not playing more of it after my dozens of hours spent blasting bugs in a fugue state is because I've too many games to play, but I'm stupendously happy it's seemed to find its stride.

Jacob Ridley: We don't give Arrowhead enough credit for making a sequel in an entirely different camera angle to the original and having it work so well. Formidably entertaining to play with friends, the carnage of voice chat during a rocky extraction is already worth the price of admission.

BALATRO

Robin Valentine: *Balatro* might be the most unassuming game we've ever given this high honour to. At a glance, it looks more like a game that would've come pre-installed with Windows 98 than the best release of 2024. Even in motion, it doesn't look much – just playing cards floating around. Where are the wizards and laser guns?

But you only have to dip one toe into *Balatro*'s murky waters for it to suddenly grab you and yank you down into its bottomless depths. The moment you win your first round, fumbling for whatever poker hands you can put together, you're hooked – and as you explore all the possibilities of its bizarre deck-building, you're drawn in further and further, until you're having inexplicable conversations with people about 'ante 0' and 'high card runs' and 'planet X'.

The result is a roguelike that feels like just as much of a tense and thrilling fantasy adventure as *Slay the Spire* does, despite that modest appearance. And I don't invoke that genre-mate lightly – I think *Balatro* is the first deckbuilder to really trouble *Slay the Spire*'s crown, and the legion of imitators it's already spawned are testament to its rightful place in the PC gaming canon. The fact that something so rich and compelling comes to us from a solo developer, relying on slow-build word-of-mouth rather than a huge marketing budget, is yet another reminder that our beloved platform is still the home of indie innovation, not just blockbuster thrills.

Joshua Wolens: People talk a lot about *Balatro*'s big numbers, and rightly so, but it's the vibe of the thing that got its hooks into me long before I'd achieved a score high enough to write home about. The swimmy CRT effects, the otherworldly Dorf on Golf soundtrack, the faintly sinister figure of Jimbo the joker and the weird bits of unreality creeping in at the edges in the form of tarot and planet cards: the whole thing feels like a game someone found in a Goosebumps episode. It's a cursed and strange relic from another dimension, and the best game that came out this year.

IT'S THE VIBE OF THE THING THAT GOT ITS HOOKS INTO ME

Harvey Randall: If that jester laughs at me on more time after beefing it in the early game, I'll start my own war on clowns.

Jacob Ridley: This game has taken over any free time I thought I had. About to go to bed? No, two hours of *Balatro* on a flush run that's oh-so-close to greatness, only to be scuppered by a mega-big blind at the final hour.

This is the perfect game for a handheld gaming PC – that's how I'm getting my hours in. I can turn my handheld down to power saving mode and get nearly three hours of *Balatro* in – I'll never be bored on a long trip ever again.

PC PowerPlay
AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG
SINCE 1996

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC PowerPlay staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Legacy gamer

To borrow a phrase from the legendary fictitious king Théoden of Rohan, "How did it come to this?" *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* is now out and, as our review details, it has had much of its original *Dragon Age* identity exorcised. A slick, visually impressive action RPG it is, and one that younger gamers with no experience of what came before, but with a deep love of Marvel superhero movies, will no doubt enjoy. There's gaming to be had here, yes.

But this shallow, Marvel-i-fied *Veilguard* is 100 per cent not what the PCPP team, and I'm sure plenty of other *Dragon Age* fans, wanted from this game. The current BioWare has created here a good game objectively, but has also cast aside so much of what made *Dragon Age* special. And cast aside gamers like us, too.

Contents

58 Dragon Age: The Veilguard
64 **MechWarrior 5: Clans**
68 Judero
70 **Starship Troopers: Extermination**
74 Call of Duty: Black Ops 6
78 **Planet Coaster 2**

FREE GAMES

82 Funeralopolis: Last Days
83 **Vile**
83 Raide

This month's Marvel-i-fied reviewers...

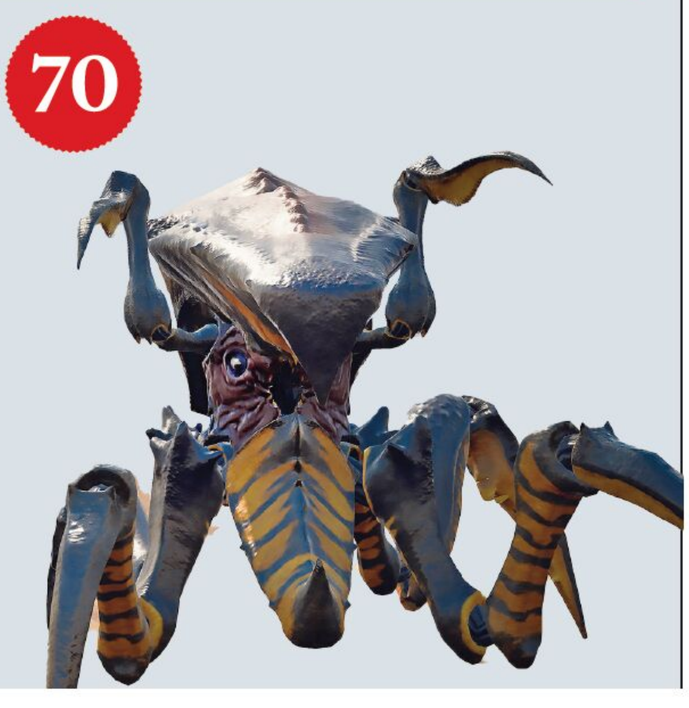
LAUREN MORTON
Specialist in
Tragic backstories
Currently playing
Dragon Age: The Veilguard
This month
Flirted with everyone on her team. Oh, and in *The Veilguard* she...

RICK LANE
Specialist in
Chatting-up mascots
Currently playing
Planet Coaster 2
This month
Spent far too long riding the ghost train with *Planet Coaster 2*'s shark mascot Bodhi.

MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Train martinis
Currently playing
Over The Alps
This month
Was found rat-arsed in Innsbruck clutching his new novel, Tinker Tailor Soldier Gamer.

JON BOLDING
Specialist in
Space fascism
Currently playing
MechWarrior 5: Clans
This month
Created his own MechWarrior clan. It's name? Clan McMuffin Eater.

TED LITCHFIELD
Specialist in
Eating haggis
Currently playing
Judero
This month
Went to a chip shop in Newcastle for a fight. Needless to say, he got battered!



Dragon Age: The Veilguard

VEILROADED

DRAGON AGE: THE VEILGUARD nails the action but stumbles on storytelling

By Lauren Morton

Dragon Age games have long faced the same problem as *Dragon Age* protagonists: the utter impossibility of pleasing everyone simultaneously. Arriving a decade after *Inquisition*, with hopes and expectations as granular as demands for cameos from minor characters and RPG features from 2009's *Dragon Age: Origins*, *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* is trying to please a lot of people.

Like a protagonist playing 'yes man' to every faction, *Veilguard* has ended up likable, but too broad in its appeal to love like I love clunkier *Dragon Age: Origins*, endearingly messy *Dragon Age 2*, or overambitious *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

The first ten hours of *Veilguard* are disorienting, even for a certified Thedas lore dork. It opens with my hero Rook and series fan-favourite dwarven archer Varric Tethras arriving in the magical city Minrathous at the end of an apparently lengthy search to track down his *Inquisition* comrade turned elven god Solas. We stop Solas' world-ending ritual to tear down the barrier between the realm of magic and the rest of the world with a bit of action movie guff – knocking a bunch of giant statues over – after which I assumed we would all take a deep breath and get into the real adventure. Wrong.

FRANTIC IMPRESSIONS

Veilguard's entire first act carries on at the same breakneck pace, briskly nodding to my chosen backstory and then tossing me into the deep end of a plot to defeat the two elven gods who slipped their prisons when I disrupted Solas' ritual. More than once Varric alludes to events of past games without explaining them, including our own journey together. It's a hard sell for a player to start in the fourth game of a series in the best of cases, but players new to *Dragon Age* will really have to white-knuckle it through the first hours.

For several hours I was yanked from magical forest to magical city to assassin city, recruiting seven staple RPG party members almost faster than I could read their CVs. By the time I'd hastily met with a third head of a major world faction and not had a single conversation that wasn't plot-critical in hours, I was beginning to worry that BioWare had forgotten to write any sidequests.

Major battles have thrilling sequences of their own as I explore

Dragon Age: Inquisition's much memed-upon first explorable area The Hinterlands was notorious for being overly large and so packed full of low-impact sidequests that people stuck around way too long without moving on to other zones. *Veilguard*'s opening hours overcorrect on that, whipping me between locations so quickly that I struggled to get to know them, let alone any of those faction side characters.

Veilguard does eventually slow down. It gave me a whole 70 hours of questing, companion bonding, and a lot of fun combat encounters. But EA has any number of studios that can make a fun action game. This is a BioWare game. And though it has the shape of one, with its lengthy companion journeys and a world-saving plot, it falls short of the compelling choices and consequences the series has achieved in the past.

RETURN TO FOCUS

Veilguard finally catches its stride in the second act, tossing me a heap of sidequests encouraging me to spend more time in each of its explorable zones, and granting me enough time to appreciate all the things it genuinely does well.

The incredible visual design of each area is one of *Veilguard*'s best features. Though it's all distinctly colourful, well-lit, and high fantasy in tone in a way that *Dragon Age: Origins* curmudgeons like me may not care for, I can't deny that the vistas are gorgeous. I dived into a spooky underground garden in the Grand Necropolis, and a crystalline lost dwarven settlement. I fought in a giant ankle-deep bathhouse of blood, and saw majestic walls of waterfalls in Arlathan Forest. Its act-capping major battles have thrilling sequences of their own as I explore: massive magical displays in the sky and dragons smashing through my path. Not a single one is anything less than intricately detailed and beautiful. I've never missed an open world less.

Veilguard is massively better off for ditching *Inquisition*'s giant zones and returning to more constrained maps of coiled corridors and

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An action-RPG in which your choices affect the plot

EXPECT TO PAY
$89

DEVELOPER
BioWare

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-8086k, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
ea.com/games/dragon-age/dragon-age-the-veilguard

PASSION FOR FACTION

Rook's six allegiance options

CROWS
Antiva's guild of contract assassins hold court in Treviso as the city's protectors.

GREY WARDENS
This international league of knights are sworn to fight The Blight.

SHADOW DRAGONS
A movement of resistance fighters opposing corruption in Tevinter.

MOURN WATCH
An elite group of necromancers guarding the dead and their secrets in Nevarra.

VEIL JUMPERS
A group founded by elves exploring ancient ruins and artefacts in Arlathan Forest.

LORDS OF FORTUNE
A rowdy group of treasure hunters and dragon slayers hailing from Rivain.

clearings. Each area is packed with traversal puzzles that Rook's companions can help solve with their own unlocked skills. Neve the detective mage can break through magical barriers while Bellara the elven artefact researcher can fix contraptions like magical locks. Maps are littered with little challenges in my pursuit of explorable shortcuts, treasure chests of gear, and statues that grant me more health.

I'm genuinely having a great time flitting around like a force of nature

FRONT LINE

Every area is also densely packed with fights that I'm relieved to say are fast, snappy, and enjoyable, even though I'm a crunchy RPG-loving freak who was disappointed when BioWare first showcased the action-heavy combat. As a rogue, I weave together light and heavy attacks, sometimes holding a button longer to charge an attack and build up the stagger meter on an enemy. I dodge, parry, and leap off ledges for plunging strikes and occasionally step back to take a headshot at an enemy mage with my bow. When I find my rhythm, I can even parry huge darkspawn ogres and then use my ultimate ability to scatter a cluster of bombs on the floor.

I still wish my party members weren't reduced to AI helpers with no health bars who I control only through a radial menu to fire off their skill combos. Truthfully, though, the pace of *Veilguard*'s combat doesn't leave me much time for micromanagement and I'm genuinely having a great time flitting around the battlefield like a force of nature.

There are a lot of other ways that *Veilguard* has filed the rough edges off its RPG origins. There's effectively no inventory management, no carry weight limit, and no cost to respec my combat skills. Gear is all specifically tied to the character it's meant for, and each duplicate of a piece I collect automatically upgrades the one I've got to a higher tier of rarity and stats. I literally can't miss recruiting a companion, and the traversal abilities they have can be used by Rook even when they aren't in the party, so I never miss out by bringing the wrong crew. *Veilguard* has eradicated most common RPG frictions, and while I don't miss gear juggling specifically, the sum total of all that streamlining is a game that can feel more action-adventure than RPG at times.

A PACKED PARTY

The heart of a BioWare RPG has always been the cast of companions. *Veilguard* comes armed both with fan-favourite archetypes – the suave assassin and the heroic Grey Warden – and long-requested specifics like a romanceable dwarven character, returning *Inquisition* scout Lace Harding. Rook's companions are each a member of the major factions I'm courting to our god-slaying cause, bringing with them faction-specific sidequests and their own personal journeys too.

Davrin the Grey Warden wrestles with becoming the unwitting surrogate father to a baby griffon to prevent the species going extinct. Neve the detective mage can't call it quits on trying to make the oppressive city of Minrathous better from the ground up. They've all got their own problems and are just bursting at the seams to tell me about them. Maybe a little too eager to trauma dump, in some cases.

Personally, I find Bellara's quirky engineer girl persona to be a grating cliché, but was immediately drawn to Davrin. I'd expected as a duty-bound Grey Warden he'd be a blandly inoffensive good guy. He is a good guy, but he's also full of emotion: a little pride, frustration, occasional anger and flirtation. His performance, by Ike Amadi, totally steals the show with that display of range. But adoring some characters and getting the ick from others (and debating those preferences with friends) has always been part of a BioWare RPG.

Veilguard does a great job of putting my little found family of veil avengers into each other's lives. They've often got banter dialogues while standing around together at the lighthouse, not just while out exploring. They have a little developing grocery list where they make requests to Lucanis to buy dinner ingredients at the Treviso market. They're often in one another's conversations with me – Emmrich using his necromancy to help Lucanis get a lead for our next quest in his personal story, or Neve offering to pick up some mystery serial papers in Dock Town that Bellara likes to read.

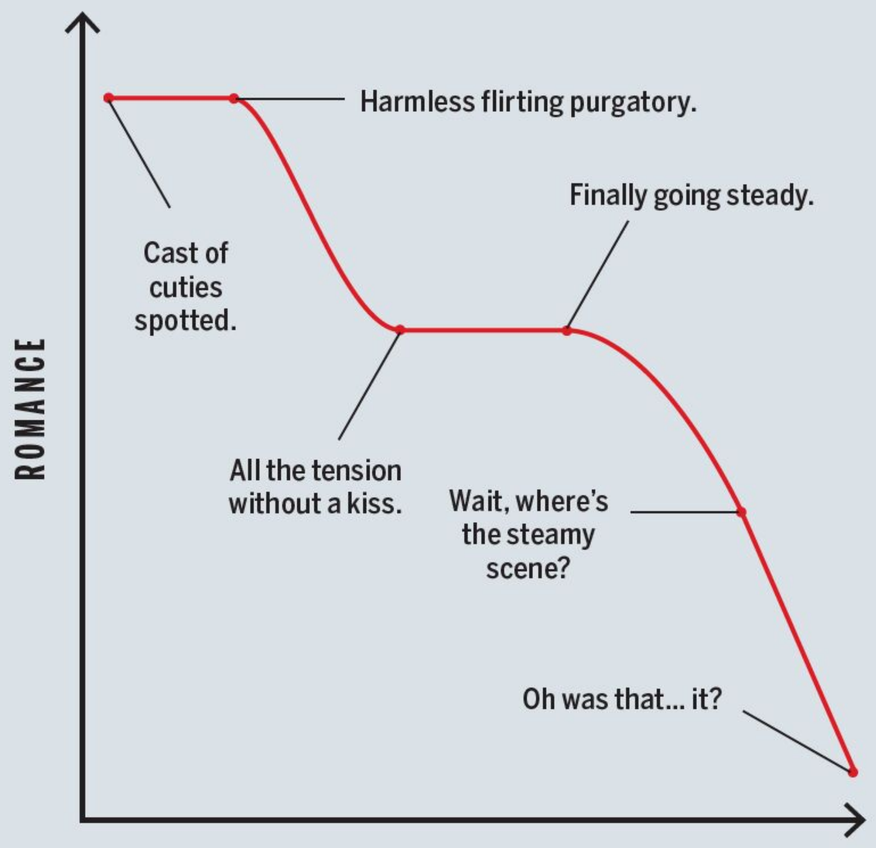
The romances with each character have benefited from all that new visual fidelity, too: the hair, bless the gorgeous hair strand tech. Rook's face may still fall a little on the awkward side in conversation but my companions are all facially expressive in a way *Dragon Age* hasn't managed before. I was surprised though, when pursuing a romance with Lucanis, that those scenes were more tame and restrained than I expected based both on past games and a nudity toggle in the settings menu that must be good for something. I'm still not positive I didn't miss a scene with him somewhere despite a pretty complete playthrough and winding up with him in the end. Where the romances do get explicit is in clarifying text with dialogue choices, to make sure that you're definitely committing to who you mean to, avoiding issues from past games like unintended romances or missed opportunities altogether.

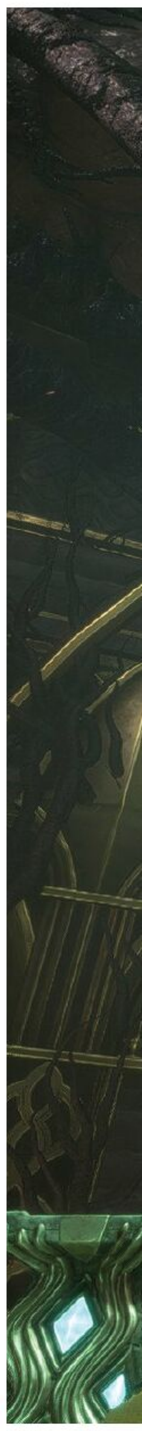
FINDING FLAWS

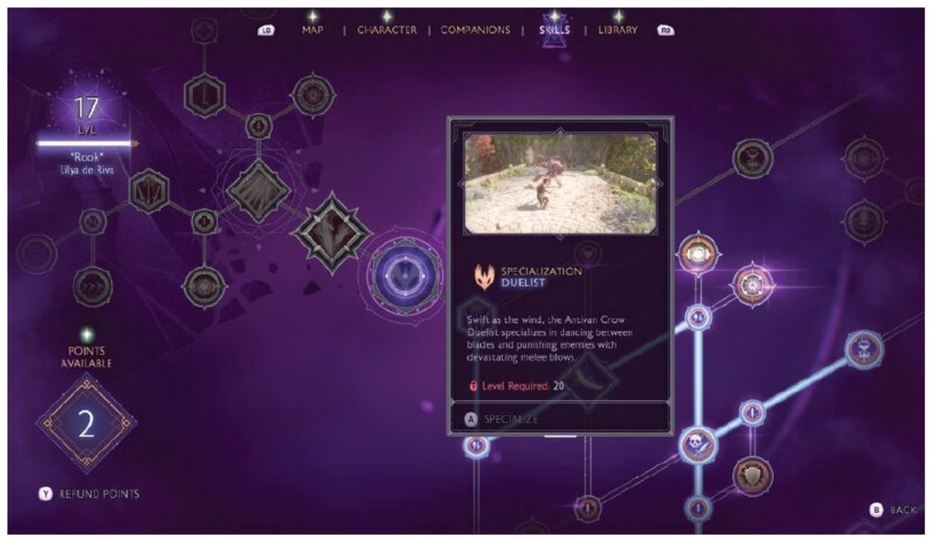
During character creation, I'm able to make four decisions about events of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* to affect my world state. It's a real downsize from the dozens of decisions from past games that were nominally carried forward into *Inquisition* (with varying

LOVE LINE

A diagram of my romance with Lucanis







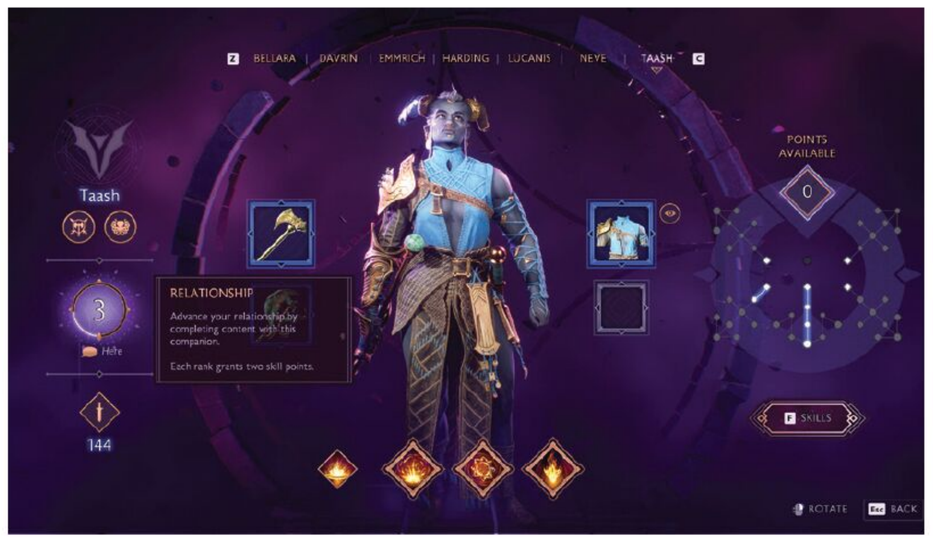
Harding is anxious to convince you that her new magic isn't dangerous.
Harding: If I can actually work my magic safely, maybe I can convince you it isn't bad.

ABOVE: My party's relationships to one another are a high point.

FAR LEFT: I wish *Veilguard* wouldn't speak over its own characters.

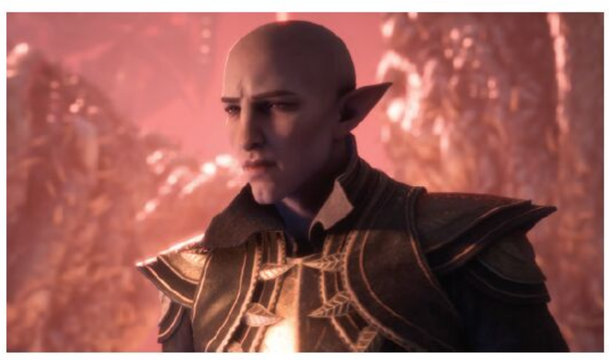
BELOW: The biggest battle cutscenes do right by the Battle of Ostagar's legacy.

Davrin's frustration and determination made him my most interesting companion.



RIGHT: Every new area is densely packed and brims with personality.

BELOW: As a rogue, I'm constantly staggering enemies and landing takedowns.



levels of acknowledgement). Though a lot of fans were dismayed by that revelation, I'm more worried about the decisions I make during *Veilguard* mattering within its own plot. And they do. But BioWare is so desperate to prove that to me at every moment that it won't stop talking over itself.

I'm often shown on-screen reminders mid-cutscene, telling me that my past choices are the reason for what's happening. "This character is injured because you let them go into danger," it reminds me as I'm speaking to said visibly injured character about said danger I remember from five minutes ago. It's as if BioWare is convinced that players have never heard of RPGs where their choices affect the plot, despite the last decade of very mainstream games mimicking or doing a lite version of the formula that BioWare popularised. The self-consciousness is frankly off-putting, like a friend incessantly asking for affirmation.

Outside of *Veilguard*'s moment-to-moment conversions with characters, they all start to suffer from the effect that I was worried Davrin would have. They're all largely just good people with inoffensive flaws, like Bellara who blames herself for mistakes, or Lucanis who can't control the demon that was forcibly put in him through no fault of his own. Nobody's a little bit of a jerk or has concerning opinions about mages or anything. Good people don't make great characters. There apparently just isn't time for nuance when there are gods to fight, so every character either has an intensely personal journey with no wider ramifications or a revenge plot against an unquestionably evil person.

I wish that *Veilguard* gave me opportunities for my decisions to clash with factions and with my own party members. I wanted to make tough choices about how to fight the Venatori in Minrathous but somehow Neve doesn't mind who I make deals with to make it happen. I wanted to question whether The Crows are the best protectors of Antiva, which another character does bring up at one point, and yet they're quickly swept away as more evil than The Crows, making it a non-issue.

BioWare made a point of saying that *Veilguard* would prioritise "characters, not causes" and while I understand the sentiment that it doesn't want characters to be walking mouthpieces for ideals, it flew wide of the mark by not letting its characters have feelings about anything more complicated than 'the gods killing everyone is bad'. They don't have convictions that conflict with decisions I'm making as their leader, and in fact put some of the biggest choices about their own personal journeys into my hands. The causes that *Dragon Age* characters devote themselves to have always been a vital layer (on top of a compelling personality) that makes them complex and interesting people. Some of its most beloved characters have that status in no small part due to the causes that make them polarising among fans. Look no further than Solas himself.

Those moral quandaries that BioWare is so well-known for are missing

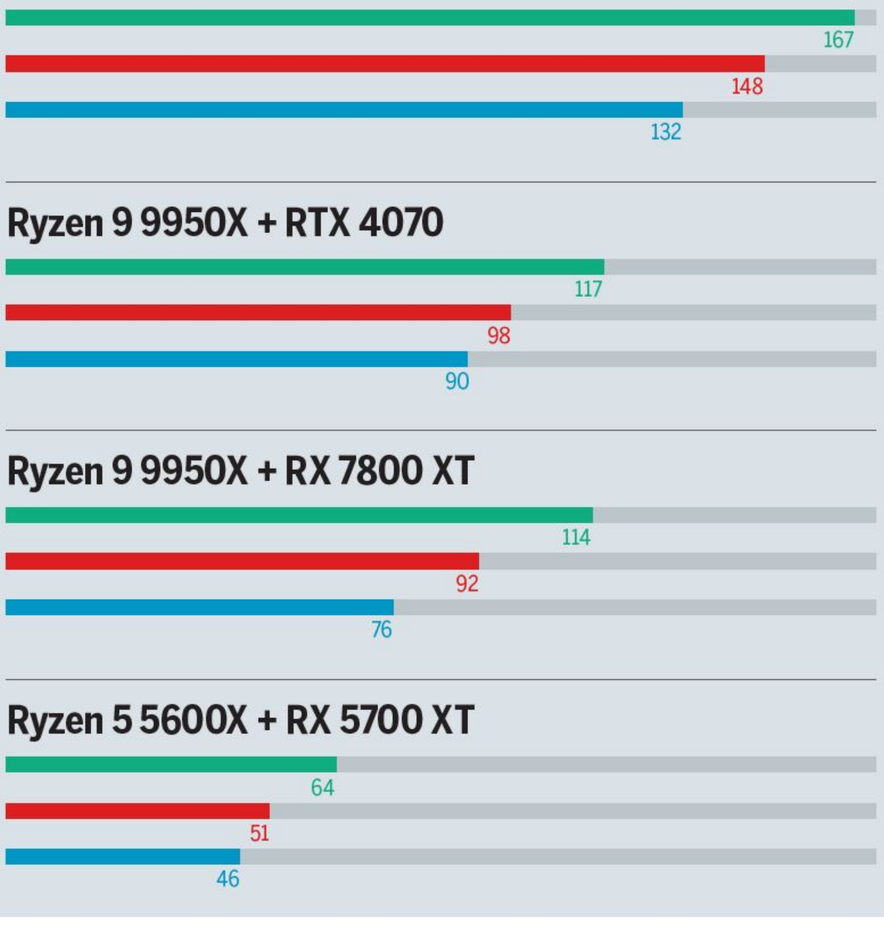
PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

System performance at 1440p

Medium
The RX 5700 XT struggles at 1440p when using anything above medium presets.

High
The RTX 4070 and RX 7800 XT nearly match performance up to high settings.

Ultra
Even at ultra settings the RTX 4080 Super bests the RTX 4070 on medium.



UNVEILED

Those moral quandaries that BioWare is so well-known for are missing all the way down to the root. *Veilguard* has no dangerous mages versus dogmatic templars. It only has elven gods who want to destroy the world, faceless leagues of 'bad guy' factions and morally neutral 'good guy' factions willingly uniting against the common enemy.

A past *Dragon Age* game would have humanised our villains, compromised our allies, and made us question our values against their efforts to bend them. My choices in *Veilguard* have consequences, yes, but no complexity. What we're left with is a fight against obviously evil ancient gods where the only attitude I really get to express on the subject is whether I believe the guy who wants to destroy the world to fix it is an asshole (he is) or a sexy sad boy (your taste may vary).

It's a shame to get through a *Dragon Age* game and find that its characters and story were its weakest element. In the end, *Veilguard* brings to bear a gauntlet of great battles and a suite of spectacular cinematics to sell its final hours. But I think it's telling that the most emotionally effective moments all come from the returning cast of flawed heroes, not its own cast. The reveals and choices it goes out on could have destroyed me (a good thing) if only it had spent the rest of its time on characters and a plot that challenged me.

My biggest fear for *Veilguard* was that it would be forgettable. It isn't. I've got a lot of critiques on how it compares to the series' history, but that's a better feeling than apathy. I've had my issues with every *Dragon Age* since *Origins*, from *Dragon Age 2*'s repetitive environments and action combat pivot to *Inquisition*'s under-utilised open world. *Veilguard* nails action combat, exploration and visual grandeur but in a series about defining a hero with ambiguous choices, the choices here are too easy to make. In time, *Veilguard* will have its own hotly debated legacy within the series, but thank goodness it will at least have one. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A genuinely great, gorgeous action-RPG that lacks the storytelling nuance of previous *Dragon Age* games.

79

CLASH OF CLANS

The venerable mech sim innovates with MECHWARRIOR 5: CLANS

By Jonathan Bolding

MechWarrior is back and going harder than ever with a completely standalone game confusingly titled *MechWarrior 5: Clans*, some five years after *MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries*. It's the classic campaign of mech-tweaking and smashing enemies, but *Clans* is a bold game that improves on the classic sim-lite action of *MechWarrior* by adding a more modern, story-driven framing.

You can bring up to four friends along on the linear campaign as you seek to conquer human civilisation – the massive and numerous neo-feudal Inner Sphere states – as the militaristic Clans, a warrior-ruled caste society that sees itself as the true inheritor of human history and the Inner Sphere states as tyrannical oppressors.

MechWarrior games have divided genre loyalties: they're shooting-first action games, and at the same time they're a simulator of a thing that doesn't exist. *Clans* walks this line, focusing on providing controls and mech customisation in classic sim flavour alongside streamlined modern options ideal for new players. It even retains the kind of config files and precise tweaks that HOTAS-gripping mech jockeys like me love. Either way, the sim heart still constrains and shapes the action, trying to be an honest representation of piloting a war machine weighing dozens of tons in the 40 years of lore.

SAD LITTLE CLONES

That setting matters more than before. *MechWarrior 5: Clans* does something quite new for the series: it attempts to give you the kind of story found in the BattleTech books and novels, which have kept mech-heads invested in this world of space nobility and war machines for decades. Where before the story was confined to a few wooden characters or long mission descriptions, *Clans* instead impresses with motion-capture performance focusing on the human characters in and behind the robots. It's not mind-blowing top-tier tech, and it sometimes generates an uncanny valley effect, but *Clans* puts in work here to care a lot more about the people in the cockpit, their world, and the politics around them than prior *MechWarrior* games have.

Rich with characters and events plucked from BattleTech

It's a big story with a lot of major and minor characters that drew me into a game series that was pretty much just a sim with a bit of voice acting and text before now.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A beloved, long-running giant robot combat simulator

EXPECT TO PAY
$73.50

DEVELOPER
Piranha Games Inc

PUBLISHER
Piranha Games Inc

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900, 32GB RAM, AMD Radeon RX 6800 XT

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
mw5clans.com

The campaign follows a group of newly-proven teen MechWarriors, all of whom are artificially birthed products of their Clan's genetic engineering program and a brutal training regimen that has left them as the handful of survivors from their family of a hundred experiments – their 'Sibko'. It's rich with recognisable characters and events plucked from BattleTech, with cinematics and story beats that reflect the personal conflicts of our main characters and that explain big-picture events in the wider world. I genuinely enjoyed it: dialogue was at times off-character or stilted, but the story is compelling enough. It's a good sign that I can point at interesting characters or plot points I wanted to have more development.

Though the story lacks nuance, Clan Smoke Jaguar is a very compelling point of view because it features impressionable young people on the side that are in so many ways the bad guys. Clan societies are militaristic caste systems that revere a vision of genetic purity with religious devotio n, follow strict codes of battle and honour, resolve conflicts via duels and struggle to see the cultures they're invading as worthy of understanding. The resulting clash of ideals and situations is great fodder for stories in and out of the cockpit.

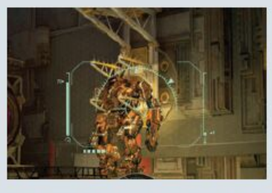
NO CLAN SURVIVES

What definitely still makes up most of your time is stomping around in mechs picking fights with the locals. Clan mechs are advanced machines far ahead of what the Inner Sphere fields, and missions will see your squad go up against many times their number in not just mechs but BattleTech's many cool vehicles, aircraft and, to my delight, its iconic armed dropships. Infantry are still a sorely missed component of mech warfare, as is the absence of the *Clans*' elemental warriors – who pop up in plot points and cutscenes but never on the battlefield.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL

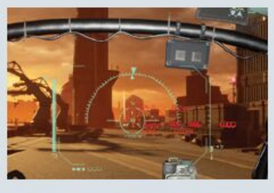
Lots of great background art to flesh out the world

CRAWLER
A crawler for people-moving on a hostile world.

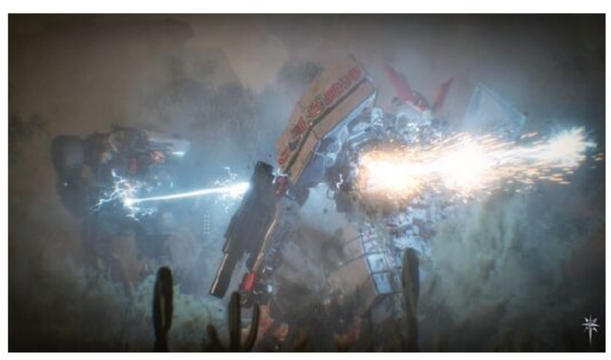


INDUSTRIALMECH
An IndustrialMech for making repairs on other, larger mechs.

CRANES
Mech-sized scrap operations mean mech-sized cranes.



AND THE REST
The detail is superb – cranes, control tower and a dropship.



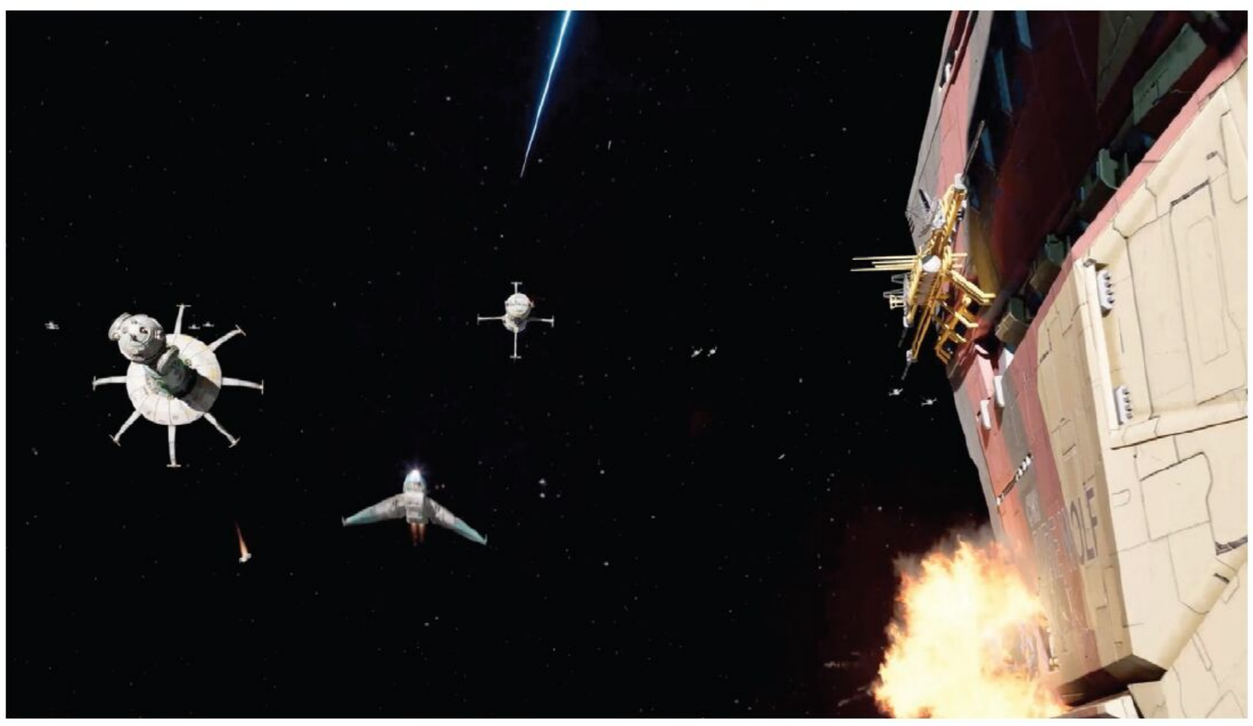
ABOVE: The iconic Timber Wolf, or MADCAT, makes its return.

FAR LEFT: Five kids, one mission: be space fascists.

Liam struggles with Clan life.

FAR RIGHT: The space battle cutscenes are truly excellent.

BELOW: Did I mention some of the environments are really good?



Those two aside, for the first time in a *MechWarrior* game I played several missions that felt like my character was part of a proper war between armies where dozens of units on either side clashed amid the chaos of incoming artillery with aerospace fighters streaking overhead. There are set-piece battles in this game I was very here for. *Clans* can get pretty tough even on normal difficulty: I had to figure out the best way to play each fight and eke out every bit of performance from my loadouts while playing to the Clan advantages of range, power and speed.

Mechs are a pleasure to handle in *Clans*, with your machine's facing, throttle, and controls once again the centrepiece of combat. Even though on simpler control schemes your mech plays like an FPS character, its height and the physical placement of its guns really matter. For example, your head-height cockpit peeks over a building, but the chest-mounted missiles or lasers will hit the top storeys rather than your enemies. It's slow-paced at times, but caring about armour, facings, and managing your mech's heat output so you don't shut down is still some of the most fun sim-lite play out there.

This is the best that handling a mech has ever felt in a game, though it's at times undermined by anaemic sound design for footsteps and explosions. It feels like each new mech you pilot has its own quirks in movement. There's also how your weapons are differentiated: a gauss rifle and a particle projector cannon feel very different based on how fast the projectile moves and drops at distance. Short and long-range missiles have their own very clear flight patterns to master. I'm playing *MechWarrior* for this kind of simulation fidelity, and it carries the day more than ever.

Clans also features the best physics of a *MechWarrior* game. The feeling of being in even a 25-ton 'light' mech is one of awesome power as you trample cars and smash through treelines. The new physics also emphasise scale well. A lumbering 100-ton assault mech ploughs through buildings a smaller mech uses as cover, and I really appreciate how tumbled chunks of debris the same size as your small mech are no obstacle for a big one.

CONTACT WITH ENEMY

Between missions there's a metagame of improving your characters' skills, refining your mech loadouts, and having technicians and scientists engineer upgrades for your equipment. Rather than the 'lose it and it's gone' mentality that characterised previous *MechWarrior*s, the campaign isn't defined by scarcity but by earning new privileges through victories. It's a nice little minigame of research and parts buying and spending salvaged supplies to go alongside the real meat of the metal: customising mechs.

There's no lack of variety here in your mechs or in enemy forces

Customisation is needlessly confusing, if lore-accurate to the fiction. Clan mechs are made up of modular pods – arms, legs, chests, heads – that can be assembled into a set variety of stock loadouts or mixed and matched. Getting more time in the cockpit and experience with a mech type lets you unlock more preset pod configurations specialised in different things like lasers or missiles or recon – and therefore more possible pieces for a fully custom design. It takes a bit to get the hang of it, but there's no lack of variety here in your mechs or in enemy forces.

Custom tuning is enriched by how each of your characters is good at different things and has a configuration of skills unique to them. Main character Jayden is an all-rounder, but Liam, for example, is good with ECM and radar, so can do well in a recon, ranged support, or disruptive brawler mech. Mid-mission you can switch freely between available pilots – though any co-op partners are annoyingly locked into a single character and mech.

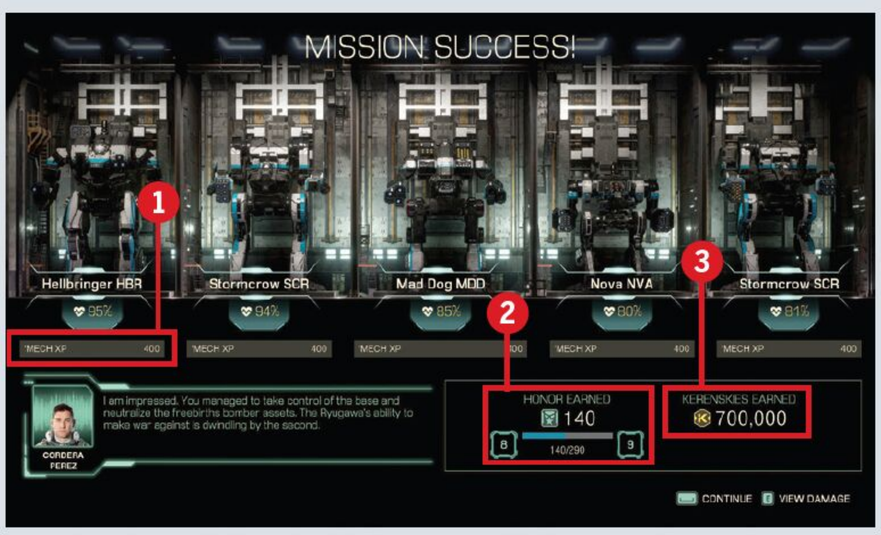
Addressing a big frustration from *MechWarrior 5*, you also have three ways to give orders to your AI squad: function keys, middle-mouse click radial menu and the Battle Grid interface that seamlessly pops up an RTS-style overhead view. Your allies and the enemies' AI are still fairly weak, but the extra control gives you a lot more flexibility in positioning and tactics because you know for sure that if one weird guy in your squad is standing behind a hill doing nothing you can easily get their mech into range and line of sight.

All the improvements in *MechWarrior 5: Clans* balance against one big sacrifice: sandbox play. This is firmly a story-driven campaign with a sequence of linear, handcrafted missions. There's good variety, from patrols and recon to straight-up brawls, but ultimately they're all quite linear. There are no random procedural missions, and almost never a large open-field mission with different objectives to conquer at your own pace or in the order you choose. While you can go back through the story missions with all your unlocks at campaign's end via the simulator pod – and even do new optional challenges for them – you're limited to the pre-set missions and the team you end the campaign with.

Ultimately, I felt the trade-off was worth it. I spent about 40 hours with the campaign before I had only optional objectives in replays to do, and though the lack of sandbox play is most felt when you're still itching for more at the end I still loved the bombastic cinematics and intimate character moments that *Clans* chose over endless procedural content. ■

SPOILS OF VICTORY

A successful mission gets you a lot



1 XP The more you use a Mech the more you can boost highly beneficial stats such as speed and turn rate.

2 HONOR Honor is spent on Mechs – as well as the technicians and scientists who keep them in fighting trim.

3 BIG KS Kerenskies are the Clans' currency for requisitioning more mechs and weapons for a Warrior's collection.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

MechWarrior 5: Clans **delivers a story of struggling young warriors alongside its iconic mech combat.**

82

CLAYMATION CALEDONIA

Battling faeries, beasties and Englishmen in JUDERO

By Ted Litchfield

"Weirdness" can often feel like an affectation. *Judero* could have only been made by Talha Kaya and Jack King-Spooner, two independent developers who crafted a vision of the Scottish Borders entirely out of action figures and modelling clay. *Judero* is a game with the kind of rough edges and pleasant surprises that could only come from an artistic vision, and it's one that will continue to stick with me.

Judero casts you as the titular Judero: a rough-hewn warrior-priest clearly crafted out of Milliput and a GI Joe action figure. *Judero* uses real, physical models for its digital assets: full-on stop motion in its cutscenes while the gameplay uses sprites in 3D environments like the original *Doom*. The music is also a real treat: acoustic guitar-driven folk tunes that set a nostalgic mood and dovetail with *Judero*'s pagan, earthy influences.

The result looks like The Last Voyage of Sinbad but more deliberately uncanny: the characters are all misshapen and rough-cut, with bulging eyes and cratered flesh, but it's somehow not a horror show. *Judero*'s characters are unsettling but not unpleasant, ugly-cute and strangely charming. That appeal is bolstered by *Judero*'s writing.

Late in the game, one of those goggle-eyed clay NPCs recalls a strange saga wherein they forbid their lover from entering a locked wing of their shared home – not to protect a secret, but in a desperate attempt to seem like the sort of person who *has* secrets. Every townsperson in *Judero* will wax poetic about their strange, surreal, or tragic lives in beautiful prose, and one of my favourite parts of the game was just wandering through each village, speaking to every single NPC.

When you enter houses in the towns, the art style shifts to dreamy watercolours, and the residents inside seem unstuck in time. In the second village, a pair of lads in T-shirts and shorts ruminate on the merits of ecoterrorism in a world sleepwalking toward destruction, "We aren't trying to get those people to love us. We have learned a sad lesson, that nobody loves this world." In a neighbouring building, a shirtless drummer extols the virtues of the divine feminine and predicts that the world will end in 2050.

A shirtless drummer extols the virtues of the divine feminine

Lest that sound too high-handed, I can vouch that this is also a very funny game. Towards the end of *Judero*, one heater of a line had me laughing so hard my girlfriend walked over to see what the commotion was: "The hallucinations are getting more vivid," Judero muses while lost at sea. "Thankfully my talking ape friend has been keeping me sane."

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
You are Judero, a warrior-druid putting right what has gone wrong in Scotland

EXPECT TO PAY
$26.50

DEVELOPER
Talha and Jack Co

PUBLISHER
Talha and Jack Co

REVIEWED ON
Steam Deck

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/1960900/Judero/

STAFF AND SANDALS

Judero's combat is easily the weakest part of the experience: it has poor feedback in general, with hits on enemies feeling weightless, the perspective often making it a chore to line-up attacks, and many enemies having aggravating, multi-part stunlock moves. At its best, the brawling is adequate connective tissue, another thing to do while wandering over hill and dale.

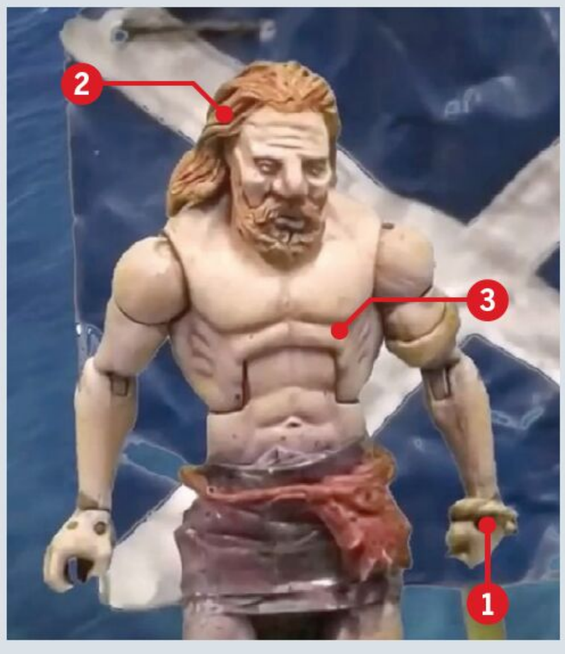
Judero's possession mechanic might have been worth drilling down on instead. Judero can use his druidic magic to possess enemies and bypass obstacles, sort of like the hat thing in *Super Mario Odyssey*. The mechanic has moments of real brilliance, like a boss fight in which you have to possess an insect and climb down the monster's throat, killing it from the inside. Unfortunately, most of the possession puzzles are rather forgettable by comparison.

Even with those complaints, *Judero* has a real capacity for surprise and whimsy in its mechanics, catching me off-guard in a similar way to its conversations. One of the highlights is the setup of its third act: an open-ended archipelago you can sail around and explore in any order, complete with optional dialogue and a positively delightful poetry reading from your passenger, that talking ape friend I mentioned earlier.

Judero is the kind of indie game that's really worth celebrating. It's funky and has some rough edges, but that comes with the territory for such a unique labour of love. *Judero* isn't a transcendent action game or a next-level puzzler, but those aspects are good enough to support its real draw: a thoughtful, strange world and incredible aesthetics. ■

DRUIDIC DELIGHTS

Just who is Judero?



1 GOING CLUBBING
Standing in contrast with other heroes of myth, Judero fights with his trusty walking stick.

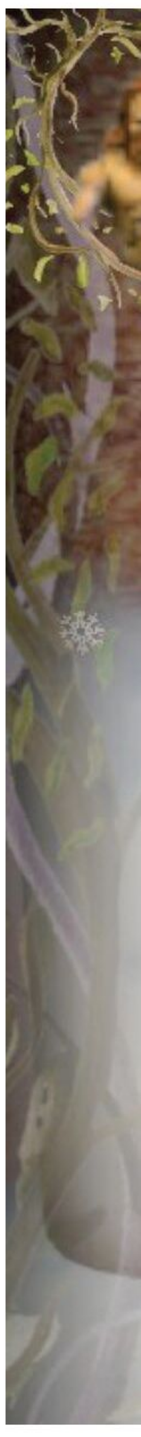
2 SPIRIT SHENANIGANS
Judero can possess almost every enemy in the game, mostly to solve puzzles.

3 HEART OF GOLD
Judero is unfazed by even the strangest things he finds, and offers a willing ear to all and sundry.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Peak indie game: funky, weird, rough and wonderful in a way only such a small, ambitious project could be.

82



What a well-dressed fellow he is.

FAR LEFT: He's just a wee bairn, Judero!

LEFT: Some of Judero's most fearsome foes: the English.

Judero's a visual treat from start to finish.

ROUGHNECK

STARSHIP TROOPERS: EXTERMINATION is buggy and occasionally bloody brilliant

By Robert Zak

If you're thinking about comparing *Starship Troopers: Extermination* to *Helldivers 2*, stop right there. Sure, they're both co-operative multiplayer shooters that involve blasting thousands of alien bugs, each inspired by Paul Verhoeven's 1997 satirical sci-fi flick. But apart from that, they're totally different games. *Helldivers 2* is a surgically precise slapstick comedy. *Extermination* is a much broader, weirder, rougher affair.

Often, the results of this are fair to middling, while parts of *Extermination* are outright terrible. Yet when all of its ideas come together, its action is every bit as thrilling as Arrowhead's farce.

Extermination's main event is its 16-player cooperative missions, in which four squads of four players work together to withstand the arachnid menace for the glory of the Federation. These missions vary slightly in their structure, but they tend to last between 30 minutes and an hour, and usually involve building, then defending, a base.

If the idea of building a base with 15 strangers sounds either tedious or intimidating to you, in my experience with *Extermination* it is neither. Bases are fully kitted out within minutes, as players work efficiently together to erect walls, place reinforced bunkers, situate ammo dumps, and station manned and automated gun turrets. It's a neat thing to watch in motion, and as a new player, watching how the pros do it is generally a good idea.

Combat is slower and less refined than most modern FPS games

The base building controls aren't terrible, but they're not exactly intuitive either, so learning how to effectively place the right pieces in the right places will likely take you a couple of rounds.

Once the base is constructed (or in some missions, while the base is under construction) the arachnids will start attacking. Combat is slower and less refined than most modern FPS games, but it still feels great to fill an encroaching arachnid with lead, especially if you find a class you jive with. Players can assume the role of snipers, grenadiers, and flamethrower-toting engineers, each of which have their own weapons and abilities.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Co-operative multiplayer shooter based on Paul Verhoeven's 1997 film

EXPECT TO PAY
$75

DEVELOPER
Offworld

PUBLISHER
Offworld

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, 32 GB RAM, Nvidia Geforce 2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER
Cooperative PvE

LINK
starshiptroopers extermination.com

Personally, I found myself partial to the Guardian, who comes equipped with a heavy assault rifle with a large magazine as standard, and can deploy a metal ring-fortification around themselves at will. Not only does this provide cover from projectile-shooting bugs, it also temporarily stops arachnids in their tracks, which is extremely handy when trying to hold a position.

Extermination's most distinctive feature, however, is its corpse-permanence. Every arachnid that you kill will remain in situ on the battlefield. If you kill another arachnid in the same spot, it will lie on top of the previous one. Given the number of enemies the game vomits forth, you soon end up with huge piles of dead alien insects scattered across the battlefield.

This has a couple of implications, the first of which is practical. Corpses can pile up to the point where they obscure your line of sight, or even create a ramp for other bugs to scale your defences. Hence, it's prudent to clear these biological obstacles using explosives, adding another tactical twist to base management alongside making repairs and reloading turrets between attacks.

DYNAMIC BATTLEFIELDS

The other effect is that it makes the battlefield look rad as hell. Between the corpse permanence and the constant construction and destruction of its bases, *Extermination* has the most dynamic battlefields I've experienced in a multiplayer FPS for a while. There are times when you'll look out and see a vast sea of dead bugs, other players clambering over them to get to some distant objective. It's a sight that would go well with Adagio for Strings.

The scale *Extermination* plays at also means your experience of a mission can be highly personal. You can spend the entire mission defending one corner of a base, or

BUG HUNT

Extermination's arachnid roster is surprisingly diverse

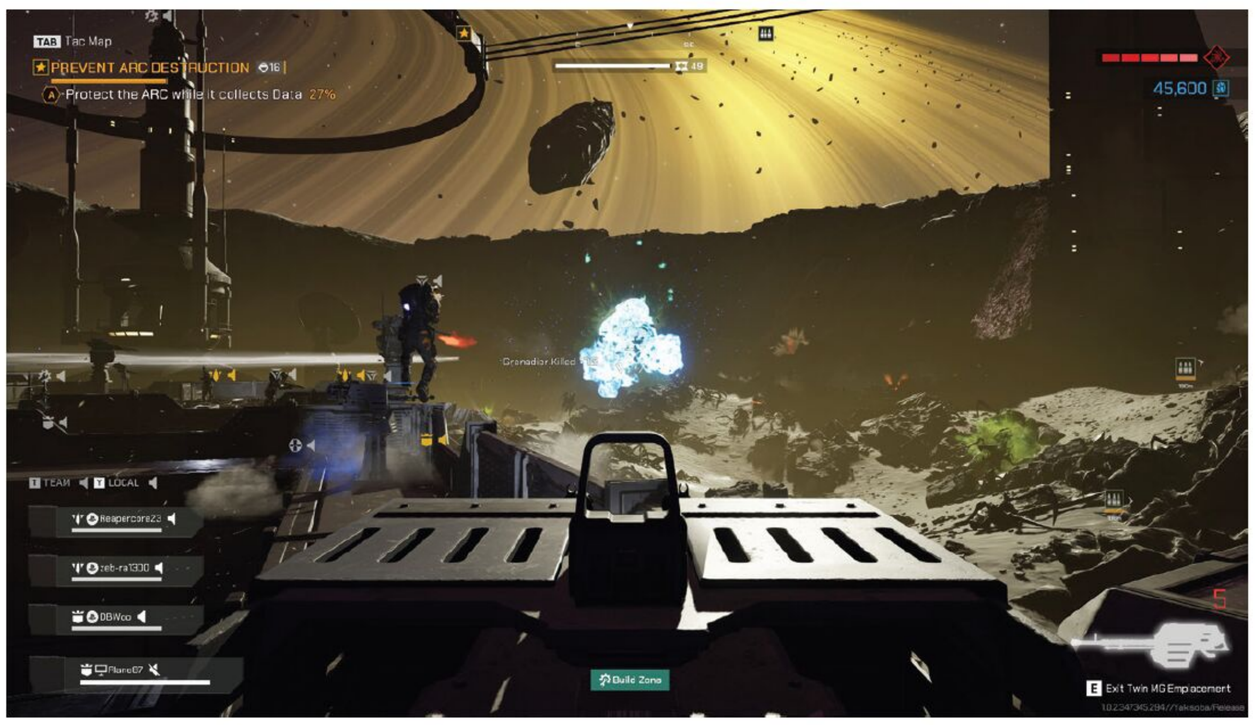
DRONE
Dog-sized beetle bugs that won't trouble you too much unless you're particularly careless.

WARRIOR
The standard foot soldier. Manageable on their own, but they rarely attack that way.

INFERNO
The Inferno bug is like God looked at his work on scorpions and asked, "How do I make this worse?"

GRENADIER
The Grenadier bombards Troopers from afar with explosive blue projectiles.

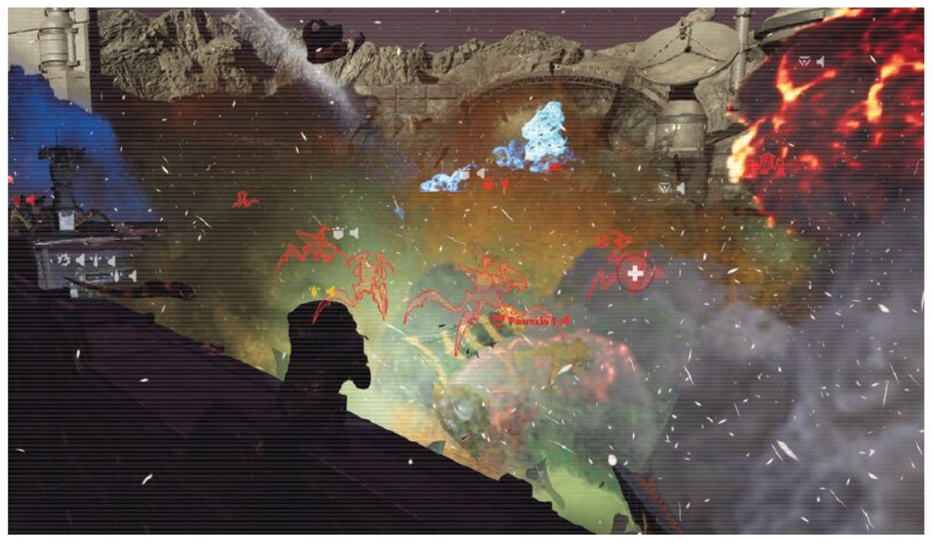
SPECIAL OPERATIONS GROUP
S.O.G.
Now a little about what types of missions we do here at S.O.G. We command and coordinate the best of the best across the Federation's special forces, and we do what's needed to be done to make sure the Bugs don't get the upper hand!
CONTINUE
ESC Back Select



ABOVE: One thing *Extermination* communicates well is the size and bulk of the arachnids.

LEFT: Arachnids can climb over the corpses of their fallen brethren, so clear those walls!

BELOW: Just an idea, why not land the dropship inside the base?



ABOVE: This gives a good sense of the scale of *Extermination*'s missions.

FAR RIGHT: Glad I'm not out there.

BELOW: The frantic nature of combat is usually fun, although sometimes the game can be hard to read.

venture off to try and complete randomly appearing side missions. In a frantic last stand on the desert planet Valaka, I spent the whole latter half of the mission ferrying ammo to automated turrets as dozens of bugs battered the walls.

Likewise, *Extermination* leaves lots of room for emergent moments. I've defended a bug assault from the ramparts only for a blast of arachnid artillery to blow the wall out from under me, dropping me to the ground and leaving me fully exposed to the horde. Once I got knocked out of a base entirely, and had to frantically run around it to try to get back in, ending up trapped beneath a staircase while a gigantic Tiger Bug tried to gnaw my legs off with its massive pincer jaws. Every mission also ends with a frantic scramble to a nearby dropship, which is always great for last-minute acts of heroism or stupidity.

A gigantic Tiger Bug tried to gnaw my legs off with its massive jaw

Often, *Extermination* feels less like *Helldivers 2* and more like *Planetside 2*, insofar as how you feel like a small part of a much larger battle. This is particularly the case in missions that aren't straightforward tower defences, like 'AAS' missions, where you need to capture territory for your base before you build it, or 'ARC' missions, in which you must venture out from a central point to gather resources for the base. The way these missions can split off into little adventures that ultimately feed back into the main event is quite novel and interesting.

As you can probably tell, I'm quite fond of *Extermination*. But there is a price to be paid for all this. The whole experience needs a big whack of polish, from the feeling of character movement, to enemy death animation to stop them springing like a startled cat when the ragdoll physics kicks in. Certain game events are particularly undermined by the rough edges. Dropship arrivals, for example, should be cool as hell, but the way the ships judder downward like an elevator with a rusty cable spoils the immersion.

Even putting technical issues aside, by modern standards *Extermination* is quite an ugly game. Outside of the impressive corpse tech, the presentation is largely staid, while the texturing is muddy and often unsightly. Considering this, you'd expect it to run better than it does. Granted, I'm using a somewhat outdated 2080 Super, but even on medium settings there were moments when the framerate plummeted for no obvious reason.

Continuing the subject of style, although *Extermination* replicates the iconography of Starship Troopers well enough, it doesn't really embrace the tone of Verhoeven's film. There are a couple of nice flourishes, such as the music and how every mission starts with a faux news report. But it's all very superficial, with no meaningful effort to capture the film's satirical essence, and certainly no attempt to elaborate upon it. *Extermination* focuses squarely on evoking the action scenes of Starship Troopers, and to its credit it does this pretty well. Only in multiplayer, however.

BIGGEST LETDOWN

Extermination's biggest letdown is the recently added solo campaign. This sees you join a Special Operations Group overseen by Johnny Rico (voiced by Casper Van Dien) on a side-adventure comprising 25 missions. Unfortunately, these missions are terrible. They all take place in murky, seemingly randomly generated tunnels with basic objectives ripped from the multiplayer and little in the way of actual craft. Moreover, you're accompanied by some of the stupidest AI companions this side of *Left4Dead 2*. Honestly, it's a miracle they made it through boot camp. They constantly get stuck on or inside geometry, and whenever they have a close encounter with an arachnid, they start vibrating as if they're about to combust.

It's a wasted opportunity, and the way *Extermination* calls it a "tutorial" campaign feels like a cop-out, since the game already includes a basic tutorial. I'd much prefer a shorter, more bespoke campaign that properly integrated Rico into the experience, rather than just having him voice briefings and updates.

This isn't the only tacked-on-feeling feature *Extermination* has added recently. Also new is the Galactic Front, a live-service-style campaign with community objectives and its own evolving story. To participate, you need to be part of a Company (basically a guild) which can then create and complete its own missions that will contribute to the objective.

If this sounds familiar, that's because it's a much simpler version of *Helldivers 2*'s Galactic War. *Extermination*'s take on this is fine for what it is, but between this and the deeply underwhelming solo campaign, I fear *Extermination* lost confidence in its central concept somewhere along the early access road. Given the enormous success of *Helldivers 2* and the connective tissue between the two games, it's understandable Offworld would want to ape it a little bit. But it's also a shame, because *Extermination* is best when it diverges from Arrowhead's work, and deserves to be judged and experienced on its own merits. Add more maps, modifiers and a heavy dose of refinement to *Extermination*'s existing framework, and I reckon it would be a great multiplayer game. As it is, it's still a good one, but undeniably flawed, and dragged down by weak secondary features. ■

TROOPERS VERSUS DIVERS

Comparison with Helldivers 2 is inevitable, but the two aren't as identical as it seems

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

***Starship Troopers: Extermination*'s cooperative battles are mechanically innovative and can be great fun.**

66

BLOPS

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS 6 is belligerently enjoyable

By Morgan Park

At some point when I wasn't watching, *Call of Duty*'s campaign became a bad stealth game. Gone are the perspectives of the faceless soldiers, replaced with characters who look and feel like they came from a Netflix Original movie. When *Black Ops 6*'s campaign occasionally channels the bombastic scope of its predecessors, it rocks, but all too often it's bogged down in tedious espionage.

I'm usually the *CoD* fan who actually cares a lot about the campaign, but it's those shortcomings pushing me towards this year's stellar multiplayer offerings. *Black Ops 6* has lightning fast gunfights that exploit a weighty new movement system to give old and new modes alike a distinct, John Woo-esque flair – and what's more '90s than that?

Black Ops 6 begins with an op gone wrong at the height of Desert Storm, with heel Russel Adler returning to prevent a high-value target from falling into the hands of a compromised CIA. Unknowns at the highest level of government are funding a literal black ops paramilitary outfit formed from ex-Eastern bloc soldiers operating under the name Pantheon, siccing them on your squad at every turn. Pantheon's goons are occasionally bolstered by elite operatives, awkward miniboss encounters plucked from *Warzone* maps that prompt some of *Black Ops 6*'s corniest moments. It's really funny to be gouging out some Cold War psycho's eyes in an interactive cutscene moments before getting into a shootout with an armoured guy who can withstand 27 headshots as he sprints around the room tossing out glowing electric bear-traps, or being ambushed by a hazmat suit-wearing operative who leaves Joker gas in his wake.

Begins with an op gone wrong at the height of Desert Storm

Raiding Saddam's palace in search of WMDs (yes, really) and then slinging surface-to-air missiles at graduates of the John Landis Helicopter Academy was the only real moment of 'hell yeah' I found in the campaign, a gleefully stupid set piece that had me grinning from ear to ear. Unfortunately, that level is a one-and-done conclusion to an abysmal mini open-world mission that has you hitting Iraqi missiles.

Black Ops 6 tends to keep history at arm's length. Marketing materials often cited the global conflicts that followed in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, but few of those are represented here in earnest. The Gulf War is almost entirely inconsequential to the narrative, which instead focuses on the dark dealings of fictional private military companies, rogue operatives and organised crime.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
This year's *Call of Duty*, set in the 1990s

EXPECT TO PAY
$109

DEVELOPER
Treyarch, Raven Softwar

PUBLISHER
Activision Blizzard

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5700G, 32GB RAM, AMD Radeon RX 6600

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
callofduty.com

SQUANDERED POTENTIAL

One late-game mission integrates the zombies mode into the campaign in such an egregiously stupid and out-of-place way that I was aghast. Single-player Zombies has always been an exercise in tedium, and having this extended fan-service level replete with repetitive boss encounters and nonsensical environments in an already mediocre

ABOVE: A protracted semi-open-world mission set in Iraq is very nearly the campaign's lowest moment.

Zombies isn't my jam, but it's definitely the strongest it has ever been here.

TOP: Heftier movement makes for a *Call of Duty* with more physicality than ever before.

campaign was beyond exhausting. If you're heavily invested in *Call of Duty*'s 'lore' this might be a gratifying trip down memory lane, but I was begging for it to be over a quarter of the way through.

I don't accept that the largest videogame franchise on the planet, especially with such a rich history of incredible single-player campaigns, should be so thoroughly mediocre. *Call of Duty* used to at least have an engaging perspective, putting you in the hot seat of the turning-point battles of the near-modern world, but *Black Ops 6* offers nothing like that.

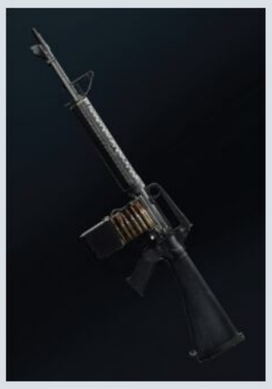
One mission towards the end of the story, Ground Control, is based around an encroaching coalition tank line encircling an airport held by Iraqi soldiers. Ground Control, like so much of *Black Ops 6*'s campaign, flaunts its moments of militaristic might like eye candy – fleeting thrills, mostly experienced through cutscenes rather than control, serving as noise to cover the smaller, less interesting Shadow Operation story beats you get to play. There's no rule that says *Call of Duty* has to have huge set-pieces, but the lack of them is sorely felt in this story, and the instantly forgettable spy thriller that's replaced them feels like a bad trade.

BULLET BALLETS

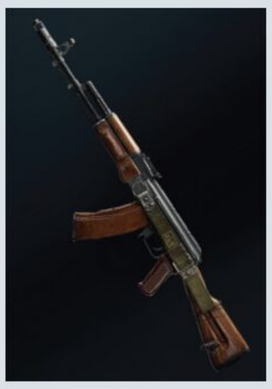
For all my gripes about the campaign, my annoyance melts away in the face of the multiplayer, where *Black Ops 6*

GUN FOR FUN

Black Ops 6's best gear

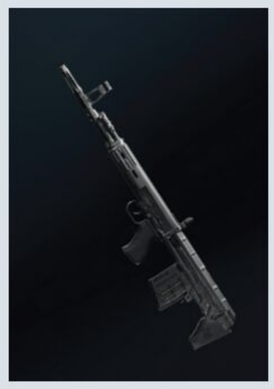


XMG
The ultra light XMG feels more like a bottomless assault rifle than it does a machine gun.



AK-74
Iconic sound, ever-reliable iron sights, and stellar damage at any range renders the AK an all-star.

TANTO .22
The Tanto spits out rifle rounds at a slow pace, but it's the most fluid and easy to handle weapon in the whole game.



TSARKOV 7.62
The low-recoil Tsarkov is a two-hit kill to the body at any range, and is surprisingly capable in CQC.

seriously delivers. *Call of Duty* has never felt better in the hands, owing largely to the new Omnimovement system, which lets one sprint, slide and dive in any direction. It's a major reason why *Black Ops 6* feels so good to play, bringing a satisfying sense of weight and momentum to a series that spent the last decade teeter-tottering between boots-on-the-ground and full-on jetpacks.

Knee slides chain together smoothly, and side diving into a room while mag dumping an SMG just feels damn good. It's a mechanic I've been making extensive use of, and to surprisingly great effect. The real utility of the twitchy slides and dives is that they drastically lower the aim assist of whoever is targeting you, allowing you to skate past bursts of bullets and accurately return fire. I've been routinely placing top three in each match, which I'm still kind of shocked by. I suffer from a subset of cerebral palsy which has significantly atrophied one of my aiming hands into a limp claw-thing – an appropriate indicator for how vital smart movement is this go-round. *Black Ops 6* is unexpectedly comfortable and empowering in the hands for a genre that is all too often a painful struggle for me.

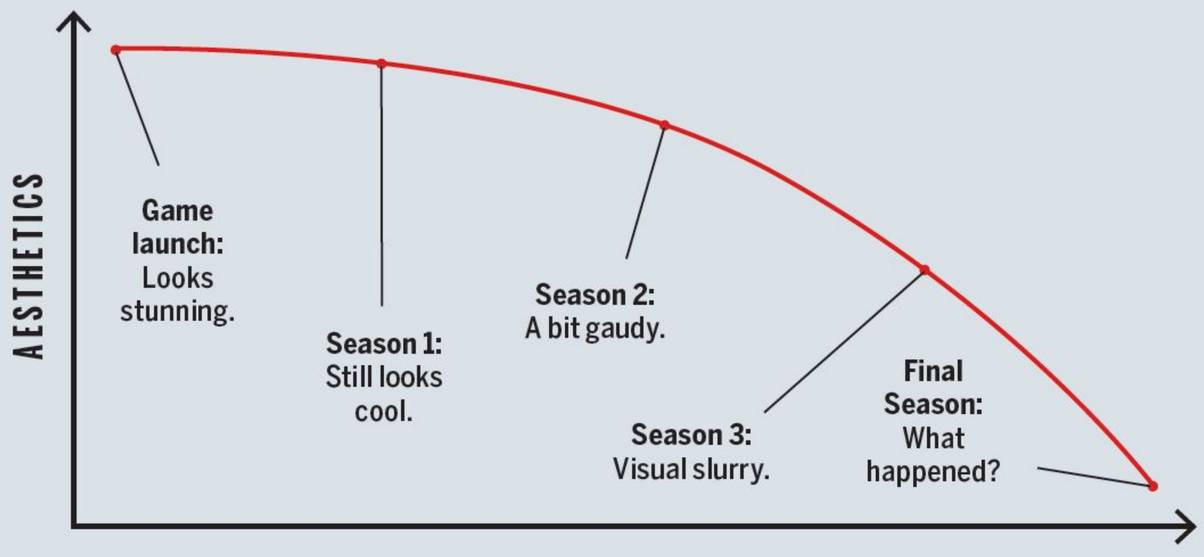
I've been generally pleased with the maps this year as well, which have become a point of consternation among players: Babylon is a frantic Shipment-like, the kind of close-

TOP: *Black Ops 6*'s campaign only has a few big set-pieces, sandwiched between too much forgettable stealth.

FAR LEFT: All of the men in *Black Ops 6*'s campaign are locked in a never ending dick measuring contest.

THE COD LIVE SERVICE EXPERIENCE

Call of Duty games have a bad habit of getting uglier



quarters meat grinder that massages your brain into a TikTok scrolling-esque trance. Derelict, a narrow and linear blasting pit that can quickly see you flanked on all sides, is an absolute joy to dive and slide through. Vorkuta's long pathways are interspersed with sporadic cover and breakaway junctions that provide ample opportunities for fake-outs and clever flanks when you commit to using Omnimovement in earnest. The only duds are Rewind, an American strip mall nailed by a cruise missile with some overly punishing open spaces, and Vault, an island outpost subject to bad spawns.

I've also fallen head-over-heels for Kill Order, a spin on *Black Ops – Cold War*'s VIP mode which randomly selects high value targets on both teams and grants them armour, Last Stand and a persistent UAV. The goal is to rack up a higher HVT killcount than the other team, and each match consistently leads to some of the most engaging and dynamic firefights I've had in multiplayer *Call of Duty* – constantly trying to get the edge over a better-equipped foe who always knows where you're coming from. New modes in *Call of Duty* have a habit of falling into instant obscurity as most players prefer the familiar doldrums of TDM and Domination, but this one is quite good and I don't see myself removing Kill Order from my rotation any time soon.

Gunplay is in line with the standard set by the *Modern Warfare* reboot series, owing to the stellar foundations offered by Infinity Ward's engine. This is the first time that all three of *Call of Duty*'s major development arms are technologically unified, and it does wonders for consistency. A lot of the weapons here feel like the platonic ideal of a videogame gun, with a few standouts – the AK-47 spits bullets better than it ever has, its characteristic punchy recoil and ever-reliable irons making it a general purpose icon. Another low-level favourite is the Tanto .22, a weirdly slow Soviet SMG that spits out low-calibre, high damage rifle rounds. It's an easy-to-handle mid-range monster with an ASMR-like ka-chunk to its action.

Gunplay is in line with the standard set by the Modern Warfare series

I also quickly fell in love with the Tsarkov 762, a wonky close-quarters rifle that evokes the halcyon days of *Halo: Reach*'s DMR. Taken altogether, though the selection and their attachments don't really evoke the 1990s, the arsenal provided here is more characterful and fun than any *Call of Duty* in recent memory.

VISUAL SLURRY

One of my biggest issues with *Black Ops 6* is progression, and how intertwined multiplayer and the zombies mode is. Zombies has never been my first choice for *CoD*, but I respect just how far Treyarch has pushed it: this is undoubtedly Zombies at its peak, with expanded mechanics, a new bestiarium of boss monsters and extraction mechanics that let you bail out of a run early. It's also an ungodly garish headache – it's the 'clown show of hideous skins' we've come to expect from live service games, except now with no countdown. *Black Ops 6* hit the ground running with gaudy promotional operators and demonically infused Nerf gun skins. Is it too much to ask that a game launch and stick to a semi-consistent visual style for maybe six weeks?

Brand slurry aside, Omnimovement significantly improves the experience of playing keep away with hordes of zombies, especially considering just how much of this mode is based around walking backwards and sprinting.

I tend to get out of *Call of Duty* what I put into it. After a stressful shift at my day job, and once I get my '90s techno playlist going, my broader issues with campaign structure, an already compromised aesthetic and a lot of wasted potential, feel like nitpicks of what is a good year for *Call of Duty*. Though my heart may yearn for a bygone campaign era, one that was more ambitious, thoughtful and considered, *Black Ops 6* just feels too good to put down. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

***Call of Duty*'s strongest multiplayer offering in years is dragged down by a tedious campaign.**

70

RIGHT: The Zombies tie-in mission Emergence is a worst-ever *Call of Duty* level.

FLUME ETERNAL

It really is better where it's wetter in PLANET COASTER 2

By Rick Lane

Back in the early 2000s when I last visited Disney World, my favourite parks out of the whole archipelago of attractions were the water parks. The squealing chaos of the Typhoon Lagoon's tsunami-generating wave pool. The terrifying, trunks-eroding descent of Blizzard Beach's Summit Plummet. Blissfully bobbing along the lazy rivers. Oh, the lazy rivers! Forget Space Mountain or the Tower of Terror, give me a big rubber ring and let me bake my belly in the glorious Floridian sun.

Playing *Planet Coaster 2* has reaffirmed my belief that pools rule, rides drool. Water attractions are the big new addition to Frontier Developments' theme park sim, adding a new dimension to what was previously a comprehensive but unadventurous coaster creation kit. This is as well, because the sequel still coasts on its creative prowess, with actual management of its parks remaining a secondary concern.

POOL GUY

Structurally, *Planet Coaster 2* differs little from the first. You can fix and fiddle with partially built parks in career mode, or construct your own from scratch in variations upon the sandbox. These include unrestrained creativity where money and space are no object, and the more moderated Challenge mode is where at least some management skills are required.

Build pools however you please using the game's highly flexible toolset

Whichever you choose, the key difference in your park building is the ability to lubricate them with water-based attractions. At the centre of these are pools. Like everything in *Planet Coaster 2*, you can build pools however you please using the game's highly flexible toolset, creating everything from kidney-dish paddling pools, to aspiring lakes fringed by diving boards and wave machines.

Even when considered alone, pools are surprisingly fun additions to your park. This is largely because Frontier has gone to town on animations for pools, with shoals of visitors paddling around and treading water and splashing each other and bombing off the diving boards (naughty). There's a freewheeling nature to the fun that contrasts with the clockwork precision of more mechanical rides, where parkgoers spend most of their time being funnelled between different queues. It lends these simulated people more personality beyond gawking, screaming, and blowing chunks.

Ultimately though, pools mainly act as a foundation for the really fun addition to *Planet Coaster 2* – flumes. These are various types of waterslide, ranging from straightforward downslides to zany spiralling affairs that require an inner tube to ride. Honestly, I think I may enjoy building these slippery sideshows more than actual coasters. As with your star rides, you can twist and turn the tubing of flumes to your heart's content, creating elaborate, seemingly physics-defying designs. But they're more compact and functionally simpler than coasters, making them far less finicky to build from scratch.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Theme park building sim with extensive customisation options and new water park features

EXPECT TO PAY
$74

DEVELOPER
Frontier Developments

PUBLISHER
Frontier Developments

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, Nvidia 2080 Super, 32GB RAM, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No, but you can share parks with other players via franchise mode

LINK
planetcoaster.com

ABOVE: Rides need regular maintenance, though it's easily taken care of by hiring enough mechanics.

The array of coasters on offer is impressive.

ABOVE: Pools are great fun to watch.

FAR RIGHT: Flumes are built similarly to coasters, but are easier projects on the whole.

You don't have to worry about propulsion or ensuring the ride loops back perfectly on itself. Just avoid making it too nauseating and ensure visitors land in a pool rather than on jagged rocks, and you're golden. I also just enjoy watching parkgoers fire out of the tubes like a bullet to land in a big splash, because I am a ginormous, bearded toddler.

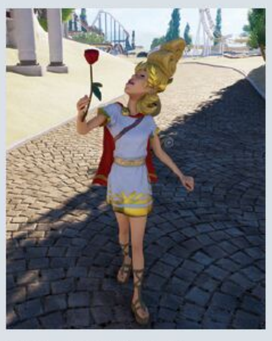
This isn't to say water attractions are completely without wrinkles. Pools require water pumps and water filters to keep them filled and clean, while you must also build changing rooms nearby so visitors can switch to their bathing gear. It's also generally wise to recruit lifeguards to ensure visitor safety, as bathers can panic in the water and require assistance. But these elements are all easy enough to manage, and on the whole, I find pools and flumes are the most straightforwardly enjoyable part of *Planet Coaster 2* relative to how difficult they are to set up.

CREATIVE TYPE

Although pools and flumes are the most exciting new features, it's worth stressing that Frontier has not neglected the coaster part of *Planet Coaster*. Building options run the gamut from classic wooden coasters to looping steel-framed affairs; from inverted launch coasters to all new hybrid coasters that infuse water into their rides. And while there are plenty of predefined blueprints to

MASCOT MASK-OFF

Meet Planet Coaster 2's new crop of entertainers



CRESCENDO MELODIS
Crescendo wins the hearts of your visitors with her harp-playing skills.

SANDY REEF
Tourist of the abyss, Sandy Reef wanders the park in their diving suit snapping pics of passers-by.

BHODI
Bhodi the shark doesn't do a whole lot, mostly waving at parkgoers. Sick costume though.

THE VIKING
This warrior invades your park to carve the blood-eagle into the chests of your visitors.

The animation work on visitors is first-rate.

TOP: Scenery themes include tropical, 'mythical' (ie Greco-Roman), aquatic and Viking.

plonk down if you're short on time, building coasters from scratch is still the beating heart of the game. You can lose hours to tilting, tweaking, and twisting individual sections of a coaster, playing with loops and rolls, testing it over and over until it provides maximum thrills without subjecting your visitors to an astronaut's worth of g-force.

Indeed, I think *Planet Coaster 2* generally has one of the best creative toolsets out there, letting you customise pretty much any aspect of your park, right down to sticking tiny pieces of scenery onto the cars of your coasters. It isn't always the most intuitive toolset, however. I'll admit my coaster-building skills have atrophied in the years since playing the first game, but I'm pretty sure I didn't have as much trouble autocompleting coasters the last time around. I also wish there was a simplified building system for slapping together scenery for items you use a lot, like shops for example. You can set blueprints for anything you build, of course, but I still find searching through and sorting the parts for these a fiddly, time-consuming process.

Regardless, as someone who blasts through character creators as quickly as humanly possible, I enjoy tinkering with *Planet Coaster 2*'s voluminous craft kit. Having the mechanical imperative of scenery improving your park rating helps motivate me,

HEATMAP HEAVEN

Planet Coaster 2 provides a wealth of visual aides

POWER
One of the most frequently used heatmaps, this shows you the energy distribution across your park.

VISITOR EXPERIENCE
This heatmap shows the general mood of visitors, but you can also track hunger, thirst and so on.

SCENERY
One of the most useful heatmaps, this shows you which parts of your park look lush, and which are visually lacking.

PROFIT
Crucial for tracking which shops and rides are hot, and which are not. Easy to sort out as well in the game.

admittedly, but I still appreciate the power and potential in the toolset. And it's a good thing *Planet Coaster 2* is so creatively fulfilling, because as a management sim, it's a passive affair.

MANAGEMENT SLIM

This is, I reckon, partly by design. Frontier knows you're going to be spending a lot of time building coasters and faffing with scenery, so it doesn't want you fighting fires constantly. But it's also because *Planet Coaster 2*'s simulation is extremely friction averse. Unlike the *Two Point* games, where poor management results in failing students or dead patients, the worst that can happen in *Planet Coaster 2* is that your visitors barf or have a bit of a thrash in the pool. I'm not saying *Planet Coaster 2* should feature drowning children or horrific ride disasters, more that it rarely throws any real curveballs your way. Too many rides breaking down? Hire more mechanics. Too much litter? Place more bins and hire more janitors. Even financial management is more about how quickly you make money rather than avoiding losing it.

Perhaps this is why, contrary to my expectations, I ended up drawn more to the career mode than the sandboxes this time around, because it's better at laying down challenges that play to the series' strengths. Assuming the role of a new manager for theme park conglomerate Coaster Coast, the career mode sees you tasked with building or overhauling a network of theme parks across the globe. By completing the predetermined objectives, you earn stars that accrue to unlock later career chapters.

You earn stars that accrue to unlock later career chapters

BUSINESS PARK

In and of themselves, the objectives are not especially original, at their most basic asking you to "hire three janitors" or "place four flat rides". What makes them interesting is the context in which you must often achieve them. One level, for example, sees you building a park on two lofty clifftops separated by a precipitous gorge. This makes an objective like "build a coaster with a minimum 45 metre drop" a lot more stimulating than if you were just building on a sandbox plain with zero restrictions. Likewise, dealing with the limited space of the clifftop makes "build a coaster at least 600 metres in length" more of a puzzle than it would be in sandbox mode.

This balance of structure and freeform play also applies to the campaign more broadly. The star system is pretty generous in terms of what other parks it lets you unlock, so you don't have to perfect one park to try the others. Hopping between parks tackling different challenges as you see fit chimes with the tinkerer's heart of *Planet Coaster 2*, and I enjoyed sampling its buffet of ideas.

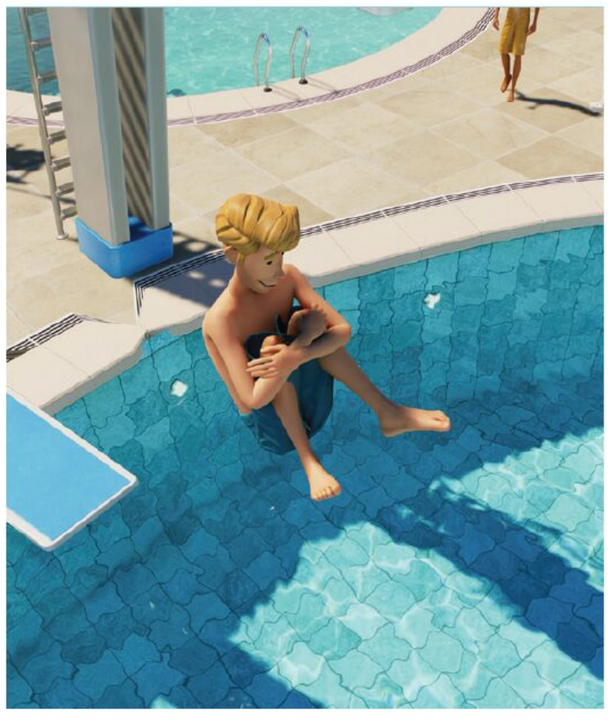
To be clear, this isn't to say the other two modes aren't worth your time. Creative mode is perfect for players who just want to build the biggest, most elaborate park possible with no constraints, while challenge mode gives you overall control while requiring you to keep your park financially fluid. There are also a few issues with the career mode. The narrative framing, which has a variety of characters advising you on park building, is pleasant enough, but is witless and anodyne compared to the satirical flourishes of the *Two Point* games. Moreover, the pathing tool, which always has the potential to be a fussy little beggar, is especially uncooperative in career mode where there is a lot of bespoke geometry.

There are richer management sims out there than *Planet Coaster 2*, and if you want a game about spinning plates and sticking more than a few of them back together, I'd sooner recommend either of the *Two Point* games or, for the ultimate organisational challenge, *Factorio* and its *Space Age* expansion. That said, nowhere is the act of building a theme park better represented than in Frontier's series, and the sequel's added water attractions unquestionably elevate it above the original. Most importantly of all, it lets you build lazy rivers. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Not be the deepest management sim, but its creation tools and new water attractions make a satisfying splash.

80



ABOVE: At least there's no heavy petting.

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes

I think he needed a new sweater, even before it got covered in blood.

DAYS GONE

Reflecting on horror in FUNERALOPOLIS: LAST DAYS

Rightly or wrongly, the only technology that really matters to me is whether mirrors will reflect your character in games. So many modern, big-budget games just fog them over or smash them up, but here's a free indie game where mirrors don't just show your character – they're essential to the story. *Funeralopolis: Last Days* drops you into an Eastern European apartment complex, as some weird, supernatural shit goes down outside.

That weird stuff begins on the periphery of your oppressive, Brutalist city, but gradually inches closer to home as you tune into your radio and peep out the window at the other tower blocks. When was the last time you saw the sun? What's all this chatter about a mysterious substance discovered in a local mine? Why is the church taking people from that tower block in the middle of the night? There's a tangible, tight-knit atmosphere to the game's small yet richly detailed environments, which comprise your apartment and office, and the dingy hallway where the other residents occasionally gather.

You're the overseer of the complex, by the way, so it makes sense that the residents knock on your door, with their expressive yet low-res textured faces. So many faux-retro games look like early PlayStation titles, but *Funeralopolis* reflects the 32-bit era at its prime, featuring character models reminiscent of Square's sumptuous *Vagrant Story*. Considering its detail, its gloomy atmosphere, and how thoroughly you'll explore the setting, this is one of the most immersive games I've played in a long time.

One of the most immersive games I've played in a long time

MIRROR, MIRROR

Aiding that immersion are the mirrors. There's one in your bathroom and one in your hall, and initially they just reveal the harried expression on your character. They even show you in your PJs, when you get up to investigate a noise.

But with the introduction of the hole – there's always a weird hole in a dingy apartment, as you'll know if you've played *Silent Hill 4* – that horror lurking on the periphery is welcomed inside. Your character undergoes a change, and what better way to illustrate this in a first-person game than by giving you a mirror and letting you examine, well, yourself. In truth, the horror element of *Funeralopolis* could be increased by a fraction, but the slow escalation of the nightmare is handled well.

This is a story-focused game where the story is often waiting on an obscured player action, be it listening to the radio, cooking dinner, or going to bed. The game could be clearer about what you're supposed to be doing to usher the story along. However, the journey is very much worth the effort. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A game where you experience a Brutalist nightmare from your dingy flat

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
BananaJeff

PUBLISHER
BananaJeff

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

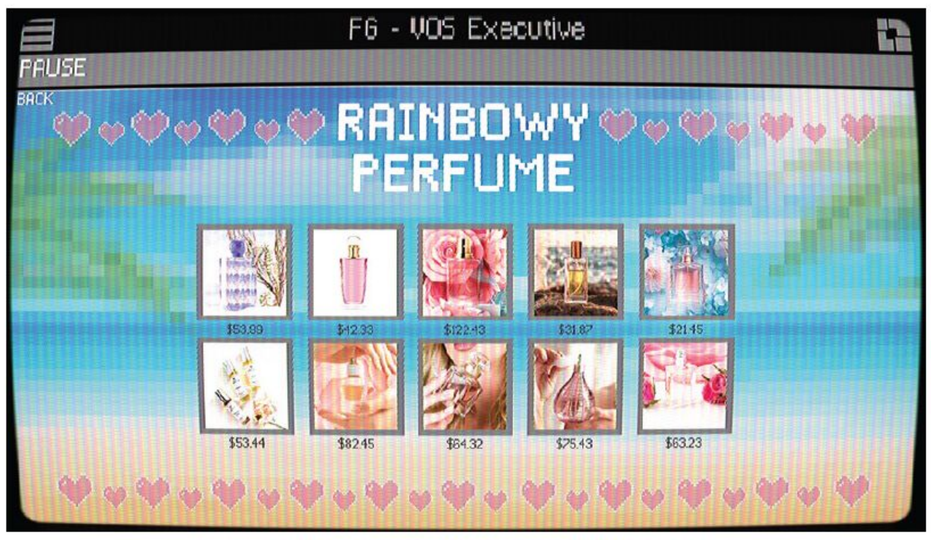
LINK
bit.ly/FuneralLastDays

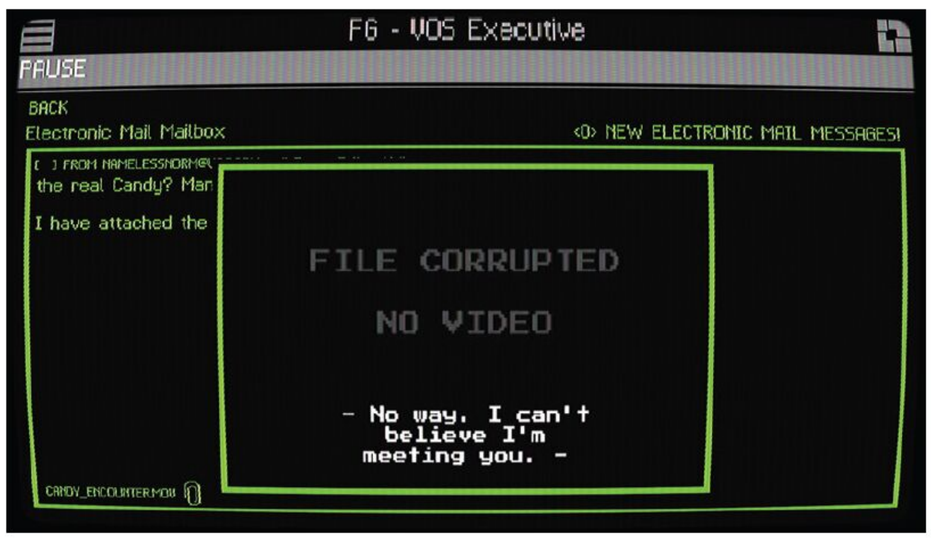
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

An immersive horror game that renders an intimate setting in great detail. Beware the man in the mirror...

77

BELOW: You'll root through the individual's emails, videos and websites.





VIDEO NASTY

PC investigation game **VILE** is aptly named

'Rooting around in someone's computer/phone' has become a genre unto itself, with even the most innocent examples making you feel like you're invading someone's privacy. That thought never occurred to me as I explored the contents of *Vile*'s PC, as there are secrets here that need to be brought to the light.

As you click on .exe files and emails and visit the websites frequently haunted by the owner, it quickly becomes clear that he's a piece of shit. He's obsessed with a (fictional) actress named Candy Corpse who has starred in several extreme horror films, and he posts on a fan forum dominated by creepy stalker talk. There are light moments, thankfully, but this is a story that only gets darker as you pull at the threads, putting on your deerstalker to discover passwords that will let you into the shadowy recesses of a vile individual's life.

OK, a note on that first – *Vile* is not great at dropping clues to its passwords, and I had to look at the itch.io comments to decipher what it was trying to tell me. Still, I'm glad I found my way to the powerful ending, which is all the more horrible as you've spent the last half-hour effectively in the individual's shoes.

While any violence is implied through the text, or by the context of video clips, there were still some moments at the end I found hard to watch. Please read the notice on the itch.io page if you're thinking of playing this. But in a genre that tends to keep its mouth shut regarding the horrors of the world that we live in, *Vile* stands out as the rare horror game with something to say. ■

84

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Final Girl Games	bit.ly/VileGame

TRAIN OF THOUGHT

Choo choo choose this puzzle game **RAIDE**

I've played a lot of puzzle games, and usually the thing that most excites me is the New Idea: how it stands apart from the crowd of *Sokoban* clones and *Portal*-likes happily populating the internet. But that feels like the wrong tack with *Raide*, a game of intimate, tactile puzzling and unravelling secrets.

If there is a big idea – some mechanic that sets it apart from the other train-based puzzle games (and there are quite a few) – I haven't found it. The rules of the game are simple: you're laying track segments between distant points, to connect houses together. In each level, you're given a pile of track bits, and you must use every piece in the puzzle, even if a simpler solution presents itself. These rules are soon embellished with track-splitters and broken track (these, too, must be placed somewhere), and I had a challenging, engrossing time playing through the main story this evening.

It's engrossing not just because of the clever-yet-fair puzzles, but because this is a wonderful little world to be in, with pixel art that tells you everything in only a thimble's worth of colours and pixels, and puzzle pieces that feel satisfying to pick up and place (they make such a lovely clicking sound). The music also does a lot to build up the cosy, mysterious atmosphere, setting the perfect tone as you try to peck out the game's secrets.

There is more to *Raide* than meets the eye – there are more mechanics to discover, and more levels that make great use of them. More excuses to dim the lights, sit down with a cuppa, and get to work. ■

86

BELOW: You watch as the train attempts to make the journey.

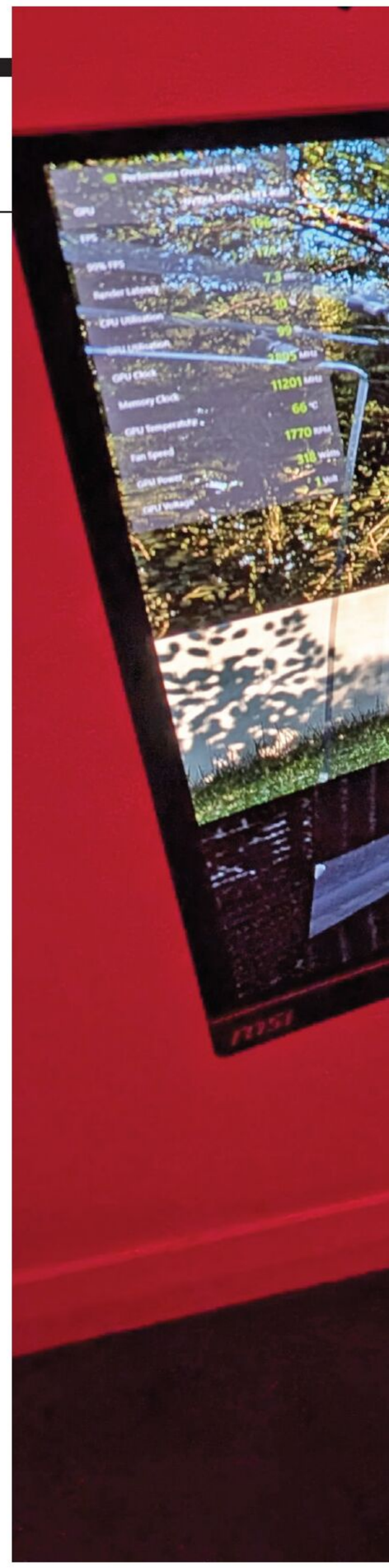
NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Kultisti	bit.ly/RaideGame

TECH TALES

TRIPLE TREAT?

Is one big screen now better than three small ones for SIM RACING?



Being a proper sim racer means equal parts fanging it hard on the track, and pondering endlessly about your gear. Sim racing is a never-ending incremental upgrade process. Almost everyone starts with a cheap and cheery Logitech G27 or G29 clamped to their desk 'just to see if I'm really into it', then the river splits and you either stick with that or go all-in and build a rig.

And near the top of the Mt Everest of planning and budgeting that goes into rig creation – which almost certainly includes needing a dedicated PC – sits the ponderous question of 'should I go for a single screen, triples, or one huge very wide screen? You might start with a single screen, but you'll never stop thinking about how great more would be.

My sim racing life for the last decade has been with triples, but I've just upgraded to a 49, the totally incredible MSI MPG 491CQPX 240Hz QD-OLED (RRP $2,299), and I have a very new perspective on things.

MONEY MONEY MONEY

It's all going to be expensive. Fact. You can pick up a decent 27-inch IPS screen for between $250 and $400. You'll want an IPS display because VA and TN screens are poor at side-on viewing, so your side screen colours and brightness will always look a little different to the centre screen, which is dogballs. So that's a low of $750, up to about $1,200. Add another $200-$300 if you want OLED. A nice 49-inch screen will set you back around $1,500 - $1,800. MSI's MSI MPG 491CQP currently goes for $1,549, it's a second gen QD OLED with a 144Hz refresh. Others with similar specs from the likes of LG, Samsung and Alienware are about the same.

So, spec-for-spec triples are about the same cost as a 49-incher. I personally think that 49 inch screen are the ones to have. 38 inch screens aren't much more than one or two hundred dollars cheaper and we're talking maximum immersion here, so 49 is the place to be.

SHOULD I GO FOR A SINGLE SCREEN, TRIPLES, OR ONE HUGE VERY WIDE SCREEN?

Triples also need a proper and more expensive – and complicated – triple monitor stand. The kind that slowly sags at the edges over the years, and that you can never get positioned perfectly right.

HASSLES AND FIDDLES

Triples means three times the DisplayPort cables, power cords and power bricks – and power sockets needed to plug them into. A single big screen is just one serving of all that. It's tidier and more elegant. Fact. Windows and driver updates also really love resetting your carefully configured three-screen resolutions and settings. You will be a master of setting up triples in control panel, because you will do it at least once a month. You will also learn to hate bezels, and adjusting bezel compensation. You will probably also really want to buy the clever optical strips that replace the visible bezels with a blurry and yet faintly magical blur-zone sort of make them vanish, like the Asus Bezel Free Kit, which is another couple of hundred bucks. One single screen? None of that. Just a perfect uninterrupted view over the dash to the track.

Oh, and do be so very careful climbing in and out of your triple rig. One little bump and things move, so out comes your ancient school compass you didn't throw away to measure and align the angles once again.

THE VIEW

The ultimate sim goal is for realism and immersion. With no bezels, a single screen already wins that mission, but there's no curve on an Ultrawide that can yet match the wrap-around potential of triples to envelop you. So are triples better because your head is deeper inside the view? When racing you're almost always looking straight ahead, shifting your view slightly to the apex in

BEN MANSILL
Started sim racing in 1991 with Microprose Grand Prix and an ancient Logitech wheel before Force Feedback was a thing. He doesn't want to think about the money he's spent on it all since then.

ALTERNATIVE VIEWPOINTS

How to get more of your head in the game

VR
Unbeatable immersion and a sense of 'being there', but your face will be sweaty and itchy after 30 minutes and you'll knock your drink overt when you reach for it. VR is fantastic for short sessions but impractical for long races or training sessions.

TRACKIR OR TOBII
Head tracking that lets you look around. Excellent for flight sims, but a bit jarring and unnatural for racing sims. Removes the sense of being physically planted in a car and can cause motion sickness for some, and does take a bit of getting used to.

corners. In reality you just never look at the far extremities of either triples – or an Ultrawide. The benefit of that 'unused' real estate though is real. It is emotionally encompassing, it gives you a mighty sense of speed, and it's gloriously sexy. For racing sims the difference is marginal, but flight sims really are better with triples, just because you can look out and see more wing.

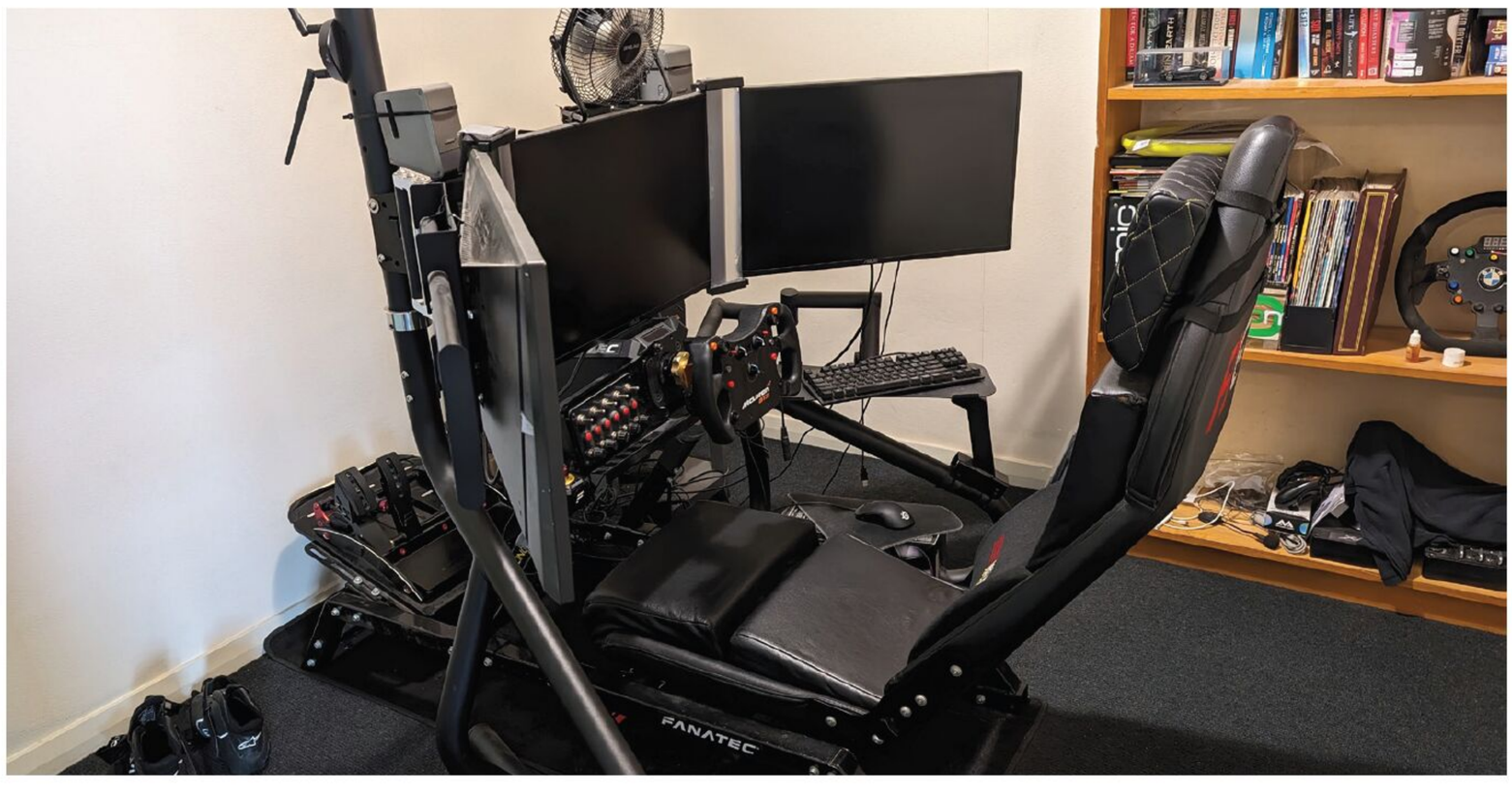
I RECKON

It's now the age of the 49-incher, for sim racing. After toying with a Samsung Odyssey G9 for a few months I'm now running the glorious MSI MPG 491CQPX (review page 92). My old triples are now packed up forever. This MSI is a dream for sim racing. I now enjoy a hassle free and completely delightful view onto the track ahead, the rig itself is now tidy and more beautiful. I feel like my lap times have dropped because it all feels more real and I'm more connected to the car – and it finally feels like I'm driving, not sitting in a machine that simulates that. ■

Ben Mansill

RIGHT: MSI just added a 240Hz version of its already legendary 49-incher.

BELOW: Before the upgrade. Triples still have their place, but as ultrawides get cheaper it's hard to justify the hassles and cost.



GROUP TEST

COMPETITIVE GAMING MICE

Formed with professional gamers in mind, even us mere mortals have plenty to gain by using a swift and accurate gaming mouse.

By Jacob Ridley

You'll find partnerships with esports organisations or individuals brandished across most gaming mice these days. Developed with *insert game name or player here* is no longer a unique selling point. But when the competition is fierce and there's no longer one specific competitive gaming mouse to buy, how do you choose between them?

There are a few big name brands in the gaming mouse industry. You might've heard of them: they're Logitech and Razer. Both companies can lay a claim on offering the best mouse for FPS gamers or the best sensor for competitive play, but they're not the only two manufacturers that can. In fact, we've seen some excellent entries in recent months that are definitely good enough to sway us away from the well-known models.

Burst II Air

TURTLE BEACH $189

The lightest

1 This gaming mouse is named after my three favourite things, turtles, beaches, and air; and my least favourite thing, bursting. Weighing less than a bumblebee's behind, it comes in at just 47 grams, making it the lightest mouse we recommend right now. With most ultra-lightweight mice opting for perforated shells that catch dust and trigger trypophobia, the Turtle Beach is an oddity in that it's both supremely light and features a solid outer casing. I'm not sure how Turtle Beach has done it but the Burst II Air doesn't feel anywhere near as flimsy as you might expect. The Turtle Beach software is easy to use too, and this mouse comes in either black or white for matching builds. There's even a DPI switch, handily within reach of your thumb down the left-hand side. Though that does allude to this mouse's right-handed construction – while a lefty probably could get away with using it thanks to its mostly ambidextrous shape, the side buttons are for right-handers.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → **Extremely light**
- → **Decent battery life**
- → **Comfortable**

SPECS CONNECTIVITY: 2.4GHZ, BLUETOOTH, WIRED / **BUTTONS:** 6 / **SENSOR:** OWL-EYE 26K / **POLLING RATE:** 1,000HZ / **MAX SPEED:** 650IPS / **MAX ACCELERATION:** 50G / **WEIGHT:** 47G

DeathAdder V3 Hyperspeed

RAZER $186

The greatest

2 A cheaper, more basic version of the DeathAdder V3 Pro. That's absolutely not a bad description of this gaming mouse, nor is it a bad thing. The DeathAdder V3 Hyperspeed is exactly the sort of affordable gaming mouse we're looking for.

I could go into a list of things the Deathadder V3 Pro gets right, but I'd be going over a lot. You can check out our review on the site for that. The main thing to consider is this mouse comes with an excellent sensor that performed exceedingly well in our testing. The shape, too, is comfortable for long periods of gaming. Then there's the price. The reason we've now voted the Deathadder V3 Hyperspeed as the 'best gaming mouse', a lofty title, is because it's fantastic value. It's around 40% cheaper than the Pro model and nowhere near 40% less capable. Though I do have one bone to pick: the Razer Synapse software leaves a lot to be desired and the switches embedded under the buttons on this mouse are particularly loud compared to some.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → **Well priced**
- → **Comfortable**
- → **Loud clicks**

SPECS CONNECTIVITY: 2.4GHZ, WIRED / **BUTTONS:** 5-8 / **SENSOR:** FOCUS X 26K / **MAX SPEED:** 500IPS / **MAX ACCELERATION:** 40G / **WEIGHT:** 55G

4

EVERYTHING WE'VE COME TO LOVE ABOUT THE SUPERLIGHT 2 BUT IN A NEW SHAPE

GROUP TEST

M75 Wireless

CORSAIR **$99**

Truly ambidextrous

3 Corsair wants to win over some of Logitech's left-handed fans. And its right-handed fans, actually. The M75 Wireless is a truly ambidextrous mouse with swappable side buttons, which mean it can be tuned for both righties and lefties, and it's aimed squarely at Logitech and Razer's lucrative rodent business.

The rest of the mouse is impressive, too. The battery life hits a wicked 105 hours over the 2.4GHz wireless connection and both connection and Marksman 26K sensor are consistent. It's accurate and that counts for a lot when you're gaming.

At 89 grams, the M75's biggest drawback is the weight. Now there will be some gamers out there gesturing rudely at these pages for implying no one wants a heavy mouse any more. I get it, some do, but most seemingly don't. The market is shifting towards lightweight mice, and the Corsair is on the heavier side of the spectrum compared to some on this list. Though it's a match for the Pro 2 Lightspeed, at least.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Convenient
- Well built
- Heavier than some

SPECS CONNECTIVITY: 2.4GHZ, BLUETOOTH, WIRED / **BUTTONS:** 5 / **SENSOR:** MARKSMAN 26K / **MAX SPEED:** 650IPS / **MAX ACCELERATION:** 50G / **WEIGHT:** 89G

G Pro X Superlight 2 Dex

LOGITECH **$257**

For palm grip gamers

4 The Dex, as well as having an extremely confusing and lengthy name, has everything we've come to love about the Superlight 2 but in a new shape. This one is designed specifically for right-handed people and is especially helpful if you like to lean your palm a little bit to the side of your mouse.

Logitech's finest competitive mice mostly retain the same 'esports approved' shape. This is loosely even on both sides and tailor-made for claw gamers. The Dex, on the other hand, ditches the symmetrical approach and opts for an ever-so-slightly sloped approach for a more comfortable experience for palm gamers.

Nothing much else has changed, though. You'll understand the basics of this mouse if you have used the Superlight 2 and that's an extremely solid base on which to build. The Dex is a decent option, too, even if the average person won't get the most out of that frankly ludicrously high 44K max DPI.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Nice new shape
- Good feel
- Very familiar mouse

SPECS CONNECTIVITY: 2.4GHZ, WIRED / **BUTTONS:** 5 / **SENSOR:** HERO 2 / **MAX SPEED:** 888IPS / **MAX ACCELERATION:** 88G / **WEIGHT:** 60G

THE KEY STATS TO LOOK OUT FOR

DPI
Dots Per Inch; this is your main way of grading a sensor's tracking ability. In recent years, we've seen such massive improvements for max DPI on most gaming mice that I'm looking to other stats to judge them by. Also called CPI.

Acceleration
Acceleration is a rating of how quickly you can move a mouse before it starts to act weird. For most mice, it's not a concern, but combined with a low DPI can be something to consider. If your mouse can't handle the Gs, it might need to go. Also, mouse acceleration, as in the Windows setting, is something else altogether.

Speed
Speed and acceleration are two sides of the same coin, but speed matters alongside acceleration as a measure of how fast a mouse can move before it gets all jumbled. This is measured as IPS, or inches per second. You might think it sounds a lot like DPI, but this is more about how fast your mouse is able to travel and still keep track of your movements.

G Pro 2 Lightspeed

LOGITECH **$188**

More of the same

5 If you've used the previous G Pro, you've used this one. It has the exact same dimensions all the way round and comes in at the same weight. Luckily, it's still a super solid mouse and now comes with an improved sensor.

That Hero 2 sensor is capable of hitting a DPI of 44K, an IPS of 888 and a max acceleration of 88G, which is to say it's really, really impressive – and you will probably never crank this mouse to the max. It's arguably so high that we needn't go any higher until higher resolution screens become a thing, but undoubtedly, someone will.

As well as having a good sensor and getting almost 100 hours of wireless play from a single charge, it comes with replaceable side buttons to make that symmetrical shape truly ambidextrous. Like, actually ambidextrous, unlike some pretenders with unhelpful side buttons. It's not a marked improvement over Logi's previous rodents but a decent refresh for an otherwise ageing mouse.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Great sensor
- Ambidextrous
- Similar to previous Pro

SPECS **CONNECTIVITY:** 2.4GHZ, WIRED / **BUTTONS:** 4-8 / **SENSOR:** HERO 2 / **MAX SPEED:** 888IPS / **MAX ACCELERATION:** 88G / **WEIGHT:** 80G

G1

LEMOKEY **$99**

Classic Keychron

6 Lemokey is Keychron's gaming brand and it's doing the same thing with its mice as it does with the Keychron keyboards, boards which have become the darlings of the keeb nerd set. The MO seems to be packing in a ton of pretty high-end features into an affordable package that still doesn't feel cheap. Despite the supposed gaming focus, it's still classic Keychron, however. So, you're getting a very restrained, simple-looking gaming mouse that becomes a very comfortable daily driver and is more than capable of keeping up with 'pro' level gaming mice at double the price. It's light, quick, and nominally has 8K polling.

But, hold that thought, because while at 1,000Hz the G1 performs beautifully, crank the dongle to 8K and in MouseTester it falls down massively, not hitting the requisite update cadence, and delivering a really weird count graph. It doesn't feel bad in practice, but it's definitely not doing what it says it should, so if you're really after an 8K mouse specifically this isn't the one.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Affordable
- Light
- Dubious 8K polling

SPECS **CONNECTIVITY:** 2.4GHZ, BLUETOOTH 5.1, WIRED / **BUTTONS:** 5 / **SENSOR:** PIXART 3950 / **MAX SPEED:** 750IPS / **MAX ACCELERATION:** 50G / **WEIGHT:** 55G

GROUP TEST

DESPITE THE SUPPOSED GAMING FOCUS, IT'S STILL CLASSIC KEYCHRON

MSI MPG 491CQPX QD-OLED

MSI MPG 491CQPX QD-OLED

It's big, very wide, and extremely fast.

With monitors growing in size and new panels now offering some very interesting choices, the new MSI MPG 491CQPX QD-OLED presents a very compelling option for extreme gaming. This is a 49-inch beast with stats to match its imposing size. It's functionally quite similar to Samsung's G9 Neo, which I've reviewed, but has the edge in a couple of appealing ways. Most pleasingly, it doesn't force you to use a remote like the Samsung does, and the MSI's OSD is one of the best I've ever used. The Samsung was not.

The hero stat is the fast 240Hz refresh. MSI has a similar MPG 491CQP model that tops out at 144Hz, and this is largely similar to that model in most other respects. Which is a good thing, because both are among the best gaming monitors we've ever used.

This 49-inch screen spans a 5120x144p resolution, which isn't too imposing for the latest gen graphics cards to drive – especially with the help of frame generation. The colours on this QD OLED panel are simply amazing. If it's your first OLED monitor you just won't believe what you're seeing. A wide set of controls can tame the vivid look some may not prefer, though changing per-game is simple. Response time is 0.03ms, and I didn't detect any input lag at all while playing a series of demanding titles. HDR 400 is standard, but HRD 1000 can also be selected and the effects are extraordinary.

Owning an OLED can be a bit of a stress, with a little burn-in anxiety that never fully goes away, but MSI's included OLED Care 2.0 to reduce that risk. It runs through a self-care routine every so often, and while it can be a bit intrusive if that pops up at a bad time, it can be delayed – though not indefinitely. It's Adaptive sync, but was detected as being G-Sync compatible on my Nvidia 4080 without the slightest bit of fuss and worked perfectly.

On the Windows desktop, and any apps that run there, text is certainly sharp enough to call this a productivity monitor. A little tweaking will let you balance the colours and brightness for optimum results here. I found the warm colour settings did induce a slight smearing of the text, but changing it on the fly for gaming is easy.

These and all adjustments are made simple via the OSD, which is now accessed by a rear button right in the centre of the unit, instead of off to the side. MSI tells me this is to improve accessibility, and for most that's going to be true. I did test this monitor in my sim racing rig, and the wheel and wheel base proved to be an effective barrier to accessing the OSD button, but help is at hand with the MSI Gaming Intelligence app, which replicates every one of the OSD settings (and then some), via an onscreen app.

Another nice plus is that it can operate as a KVM switch, and it offers up a healthy 98W via USB Type C to power any devices.

This is a glorious panel built with the bells and whistles you need, and no bothersome encumbrances. Right now it's our pick for the best 49-inch screen you can buy today.

Ben Mansill

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
$2,299

LINK
msi.com

SPECS
Screen size: 49-inch; Screen type: QD OLED; Resolution: 5120x1440; Max refresh rate: 240Hz; Colour gamut (stated): 99% P3; Inputs: 1x HDMI 2.1, 1x DisplayPort 1.4, 1x USB Type-C, USB hub, 3.5mm audio; HDR: VESA DisplayHDR: True Black 400; Features: KVM.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

One of the best QD OLED panels going, with a stunning 240Hz refresh and visuals that are the best you can get right now.

95

Logitech G915 X Lightspeed

How does a low-profile gaming keyboard fare?

The Logitech G915X Lightspeed is the top-of-the-line keyboard from the market-leading peripherals maker. Mechanical, packed with RGB and sporting Logitech's low-profile keys, the G915X is a refresh of the widely loved G915 which debuted in 2019. It's releasing with a lower price than its predecessor (down $30) and subtly different designs across the board.

Being the most expensive board Logitech has available, this is the pinnacle of Logitech's gaming range. It includes a Numpad, media controls, a volume scroll wheel and quick buttons for switching between Bluetooth and the wireless dongle, adjusting keyboard brightness and activating 'Game Mode' (which cuts off the windows key to avoid misspresses). The board is also capable of wired use, with a battery life of up to 800 hours with the lights turned off, though that can go as low as 36 hours with RGB brightness up all the way. A TKL version that sheds the Numpad is available overseas, along with a wired variant, but not in Australia.

The most noticeable thing about the G915X Lightspeed is its 'G' keys. On some of Logitech's higher-end boards, the company includes programmable G keys that can be bound to either simple binds or programmed combinations of keys. In many games these are likely to not be very useful, but if you want quick access to tools in programs or specific item toggles in fantasy games or MOBAs, the five G keys down the left side and the four across the top left might be handy to you.

If that's not enough macroing, the G915X has KEYCONTROL support, allowing for macros and rebinding across the board. That's managed through the Logitech G Hub app, which is one of the best peripherals management apps for changing RGB settings too, with the depth of customisation as deep as ever on the G915X. All keys can be modified to specific colours, with a wide range of animations and programmed lighting modes ready to go.

New key switches (using Logitech's brown GL 'linear' design in Australia) that improve stability while also being quieter lead the updates, with the actuation point reduced from 1.5mm to 1.3mm and a new material in use that offers wear resistance. The board is also physically bulkier than the original G915, with the aluminium top plate bumped up to 1.5mm (was 1.2mm) to improve build quality.

The result of these things is a keyboard that feels especially premium; the extra size on the left that's allocated to the vertical G keys is a bit daunting and it's easy for your hands to get lost on the board. In the box, you'll also get a USB A-to-C extender and a USB-C charging cable.

The G915 X is a worthwhile option if you're after a gaming keyboard that looks the part and has the specs to match while also not looking like a sci-fi prop. However the cost of it and its sheer size make me wish the TKL and wired variants were available in Australia. It's a high base price but it's easily one of the nicest-feeling keyboards that I've ever reviewed.

Zachariah Kelly

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
$399

LINK
logitechg.com

SPECS
Length: 475 mm, width: 150 mm, height: 22.6 mm, weight: 1080g, battery life: up to 800 hours (RGB off), up to 90 hours (RGB at 50%), up to 36 hours (RGB 100%), actuation force: 43g, actuation Point: 1.3 mm, total keypress travel distance: 3.2 mm.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A huge keyboard with several handy extra buttons. The price is quite high but the quality speaks for itself.

90

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

"The first fish I caught was a puny 12cm crayfish from a pond"

Doing anything but fishing in **WEBFISHING**

Alone in an off-putting but sterile-looking Santa Monica hotel room, with the ocean to one side of me and a vast network of Chipotles to the other, I turned to my laptop for a hit of human connection. On Steam's top-sellers list, I found a game that seemed suitable for hotel-grade Wi-Fi: *Webfishing*.

It's a fishing game, but really it's a cosy hangout game with little lake and seaside environments, emotes, props and text chat. Like all of these social games, though, the server's wallflowers (myself included) never muster more than a 'hello' or a question about the controls unless some particularly outgoing player drums up a conversation – and there was no such bon vivant on the server I joined.

TYLER WILDE

THIS MONTH
Silently bonded with strangers by meowing at them.

ALSO PLAYED
Civilization 6

Things were looking dire at first (I said 'hi' to someone and they quit the game), but everything changed when I overheard one player reveal to another that you can press 'G' to meow (we're all cats, you see).

I now had a far better means of communication than text chat: spamming meows. "Muh-m-m-muh-m-muhyow," I said to the fishercats lining the end of an ocean pier. They said "M-m-meow" back.

I also enjoyed walking up to players who were minding their own business, meowing in their faces, and strolling away. I understand better now why cats and certain puckish children like to do that. It says, "I exist. No questions, please".

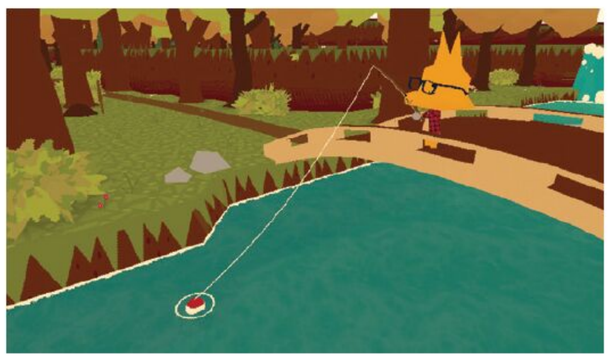
In games where you drive a car, it's disappointing when you can't honk the horn, and I now think I'd be just as disappointed to control a cat with no meow button.

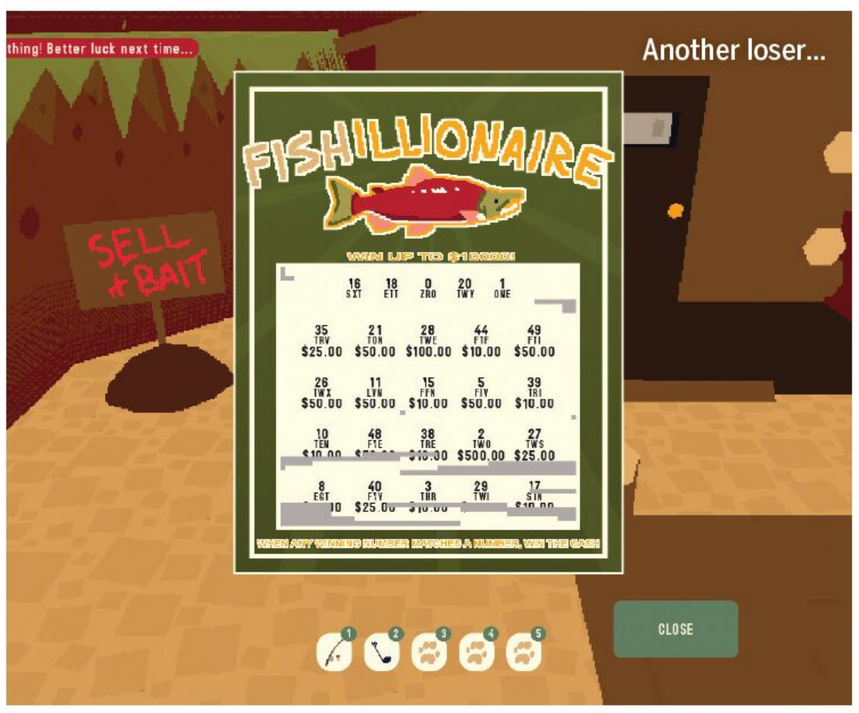
TOP: Now this is what it's all about.

CLAWS OUT

The fishing here is real simple: there's some holding the mouse button and some rapidly clicking the mouse button, nothing hard. The first fish I caught was a puny 12cm crayfish from a pond – it was

LATER I SNAGGED A 108.07CM FLOUNDER THAT WAS AS BIG AS MY QUITE-BIG HEAD





depicted with so few pixels that it barely had a shape – but later I snagged a 108.07cm flounder that was as big as my quite-big head.

Still, I lost interest in fishing quickly and went wandering, eventually tailing a pair of cats to a secluded beach shop which sold typical beach attire, and to my genuine surprise, scratch-off lotto tickets. I instantly hocked all the fish I caught and bought $100 worth of Fishillionaire scratchers.

Each time I scratched off a losing ticket my cat frowned. I frowned too. But then I won! $100! A break-even gambling session: what a great way to feel good by first causing yourself to feel bad. I went back to the shop intending to buy another $100 of scratchers, but once again proved distractible when I spotted a $100 metal detector. A much more responsible investment!

After chasing beeps for several minutes, however, all I found was a junk ring and an old coin.

No money now, just worms. I walked back to the pier, where dandily-dressed cats were still reeling in big fish, quiet and content. I meowed. They meowed. My existence affirmed, I cast my line into the ocean. ■

"Irreverent bloody FPS carnage"

Chainsawing fools in TURBO OVERKILL

ROBERT JONES

THIS MONTH
Told Syn to suck it down.

ALSO PLAYED
Pillars of Eternity, Diablo IV

As I slide down a sloped metal gantry, my chainsaw leg (yup, you heard) carving its way through a host of AI-controlled augmented superfreaks, spraying gore all over the place in sync with a totally bitchin' electrosynth rock soundtrack, I'm suddenly reminded why the PC gaming '90s is, and always will be, etched on my soul.

I've stepped into the shoes of Johnny Turbo – half-metal, half-human, all-murder machine, a boomer shooter hero who sits somewhere between Duke Nukem, Doomguy, and The Hacker from *System Shock*, as an all-'90s FPS hero who never stops moving, killing or flicking the finger to foes.

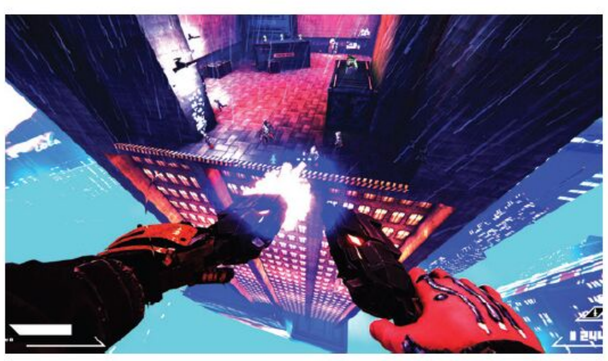
God, *Turbo Overkill* is fast. Johnny Turbo, whose chainsaw leg activates at any time to slide-saw through enemies at great speed, obeys the old-fashioned FPS rule that if you aren't moving then you are dead, and that means a game in which you're always strafing, boostpad jumping, dashing, wall-running, or sliding to avoid enemy fire while executing your own objectives with prejudice.

MAXIMUM PREJUDICE

The arsenal available to Johnny Turbo is suitably '90s, too. From his dual pistols, through shotguns, double-barrelled shotguns, machine guns, chainguns, grenade launchers, rocket launchers and more, Johnny exists in a permanent shower of spent cartridges or shell casings. Oh, and then there are the micro missiles Turbo can fire out of his robotic arm.

Johnny is fighting the rogue AI Syn across the dystopian city of Paradise, and levels within it are as if Blade Runner, *Doom*, *Quake*, and *System Shock* had a baby. Skyscrapers are littered with jump pads, wall-running pads, pick-ups, collectibles, secrets, enemies and, yes, even vending machines to shop at, allowing Turbo to stock up on weapons, ammo and upgrades.

Johnny, like V in *Cyberpunk 2077*, can be upgraded in various ways, with augmentations in his head, arms, legs and chest unlocking additional moves or bonuses, such as enhanced chainsaw legging. These augs don't change the core, though, which is always irreverent bloody FPS carnage that pays homage to the '90s greats. ■



"Set-pieces like the ruined factory manage to be incredibly deep"

Trying to remember the basics of CQC in METAL GEAR SOLID 3

I don't even know how long it's been since I played *Metal Gear Solid 3*. It's a game I've perennially wanted to revisit, but I've found myself stymied by platform exclusivity: I like playing games on my PC, or a handheld. I could never bother to shift my butt from my desktop to my couch for the PS3 version, but I did try my hand at this game's 3DS port like some kind of sick freak – impressive, but not how The Game Was Meant To Be Played™.

TED LITCHFIELD

THIS MONTH
Shot Midwestern-accented Russians with tranquillisers.

ALSO PLAYED
Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne, *Mouthwashing*

A year after its initial release, the *Metal Gear Solid: Master Collection* is finally in a fit enough state that I didn't feel bad blowing $30 on it. I loaded it up on my Steam Deck and have been working my way through *MGS3* in bed on those nights I get off work and just don't feel like playing games upright at my desk. It won't shock you to learn that *MGS3* still whips ass, but I was surprised to find it's even better than I remembered.

OLD SNAKE

I'm a more patient gamer than I used to be, finding myself gelling with stealth games better in general and also forgiving myself when my play isn't up to snuff. Over the years I've seen the *Metal Gear* series' level design compared negatively to the nonlinear labyrinths of PC sims, but *MGS3*'s arenas have their own charm.

Set-pieces like the ruined factory in the prologue manage to be incredibly deep, self-contained stealth puzzle boxes, while the soldiers in Tselinoyarsk are some of the sharpest-eyed foes I've encountered in a stealth game. I also appreciate the restrictions on *MGS3*'s nonlethal takedowns: these soldiers are super touchy and likely to turn around as you approach, meaning that melee knockouts aren't an instant win button like in *Thief* or *Metal Gear Solid 5*, but rather a situational, risky manoeuvre. The tranquilliser pistol, meanwhile, is limited by its sound suppressors' limited durability.

SOLDIERS IN TSELINOYARSK ARE SOME OF THE SHARPEST-EYED FOES I'VE ENCOUNTERED

My newfound patience as a wizened man of almost-30 also makes me approach the Codec with fresh ears. Not only are *MGS3*'s many phone calls fun and memorable, they have a surprising degree of reactivity to where you are in the game and what you've done.

Also, I never fully appreciated how absurd it is that this game has a polygonal PS2 Lyndon Johnson, or that its prologue ends with an excruciatingly long conversation between Johnson and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev about *Metal Gear* lore. It is profanely, absurdly, deliciously stupid to present two world leaders talking about how The Boss won World War II, PS2 Lyndon Johnson laying down the most Buck Strickland in King of the Hill-ass delivery of her Russian nom de guerre, 'Voyevoda'. Hideo Kojima is a genius. ■

Guns and butter, PS2 Lyndon Johnson?!?

LEFT: You can grab guards to interrogate, knock out, or kill them.

BELOW: This area is the game's first true test.

All hail to the skybox.

"It shows you piles of corpses, then revels in its mechs and grimdark"

THE FOREVER WINTER stares into the abyss, and it stares back

It's a little tragedy when a game isn't what we want it to be. I wanted the stealth in *Star Wars Outlaws* to have the intricate yet logical beauty of say, *Hitman*. I wanted *Last Train Home* to be turn-based. I want *Far Cry* to stop undermining its own open worlds with invisible walls made of bullet sponges. Sometimes you shrug, sometimes you get over it, but sometimes it means quitting, uninstalling and seeing if Steam will refund you. As an opinion, this is all fine, but if you're writing about games, it's not a valid criticism.

The Forever Winter isn't an FPS version of *This War of Mine*. That's what I was looking for. This is not its fault. It's my problem. But, it was kind of the USP of this game, wasn't it? It was sold to us as the anti-war thing that I've beaten a drum for in the pages of this very magazine. Furthermore, as it stands, it's not very good. As such, I feel justified in crying about the new wine we were promised dying on the vine.

MATT KILLEEN

THIS MONTH
Left the table for a game named after a Taylor Swift song.

ALSO PLAYED
Star Wars: Outlaws

GUN STORE-CUM-TEMPLE

It's not that you have guns, it's that *The Forever Winter* is too enamoured of the militarism and the destruction that it suggested it would be critiquing. It shows you piles of corpses, then revels in its mechs and future-war grimdark. It wants you to be part of all that, to obsess about firearms, in a world devastated by them. It seems to be asking me to spend water so I can use the gun store-cum-temple, where the cool modern weapons line the walls and the old shotguns hang from the ceiling like fetishes.

The game has atmosphere like a sledgehammer. There's a touch of *Little Nightmares*, a lot of *STALKER* and a chunk of *Metro*, but it doesn't do what these games did well. Terminator is the other touchstone, but everything wants to kill you including the humans who, you would think, had better things to do. I found just running the whole time and ignoring everything else was the best tactic. *Dying Light* did that by design, and I didn't like that either.

But this isn't those games. It's just another extraction shooter. Which is all fine, except that in this case the shooting is weak, the stealth is poor, and don't get me started on the water thing. And there are zombies. They're called cyborgs, but they're zombies.

It's in Early Access so it will probably function adequately in due time, but the essence is unlikely to change. It wasn't what I wanted, but it doesn't seem to be good at what it is, and that's someone else's. The kind of person who likes miserable and brutal time sinks, probably. ■

THERE ARE ZOMBIES. THEY'RE CALLED CYBORGS, BUT THEY'RE ZOMBIES

IT'S ALL OVER...

When the tall, slender elf stepped into my office early one morning, I'd thought at first I was still dreaming. She was beautiful, with her long golden hair flowing down and across her shoulders. But in a New York minute I was snapped to reality by the revelation that Anna was merely a cosplaying fan of a popular MMORPG, *Fantasy Crown*, and had booked it here from the game's annual convention following the murder of her fellow *Fantasy Crown* player, Rusty.

"Oh Dick, you've got to help me," Anna pleaded over my desk. "Rusty's been killed and nobody knows what to do. This was his first convention, too. He'd been so happy, he'd been telling everyone all day at the event how pleased he'd been after getting his character 'just the way he wanted them', but… now…" she broke down crying. "I'd left the event before the afterparty started, but when Carmen, the event's organiser, called me an hour ago saying Rusty had been found dead and the police were holding everyone in a lockdown, I knew I had to come to you, Dick." I could never say no to a dame.

The *Fantasy Crown* convention was being held in a cavernous downtown warehouse, which had been kitted out inside to look like a medieval village, and after a day of themed activities such as archery and jousting, as well as playing plenty of *Fantasy Crown*, it had transitioned into an afterparty in the tavern for the *Fantasy Crown* royal council, which included five attendees as well as Rusty. But, at just after 3am, Rusty had been found dumped inside a tall barrel behind the back of the tavern. An examination of the bloodied, broken corpse indicated he'd been beaten to death with a blunt object, most likely a hammer. And, as Anna had confirmed she'd said goodbye to Rusty before she left the convention at midnight, Rusty had his ticket punched at the afterparty.

A quick check of the guest list, along with CCTV footage of the building's one entrance and exit, confirmed that nobody had left the convention after midnight, so either the killer had managed to slip away somehow or, as my gut told me was more likely, they were still in the building. It was time to turn this place upside down, interview each of the five remaining revellers, and sniff out the killer. And I'd start with the woman who'd found the body: Vivienne. Or to address her by her *Fantasy Crown* title, Vivienne de Montenbrass, Queen Consort to the King of Starensia.

TO BE CONTINUED...

THE PCPP INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **THE BIG SLI**

...UNTIL FEB 24

PC GAMER

THE GLOBAL AUTHORITY ON PC GAMES

Over 22 million gamers visit us online every month.

Join them.

www.pcgamer.com

WAR THUNDER

New? GET YOUR FREE BONUS

WARTHUNDER.COM/TANK

Battle in more than 2500 different aircraft, tanks and ships from the 1930s to present day- Including more than 20 different models of the Legendary Supermarine Spitfire! Control any vehicle using your mouse and keyboard, gamepad or joystick. Now available for FREE on PC, Playstation 5 and Xbox Series. Get your free bonus now!

Windows STEAM Mac oculus VIVE

PS4 XBOX ONE PS5 XBOX SERIES X|S

Gaijin entertainment
© 2009—2018 by Gaijin Entertainment.
All rights reserved.

12 www.pegi.info